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THE MEANING OF CHRISTIAN PERFECTION

by

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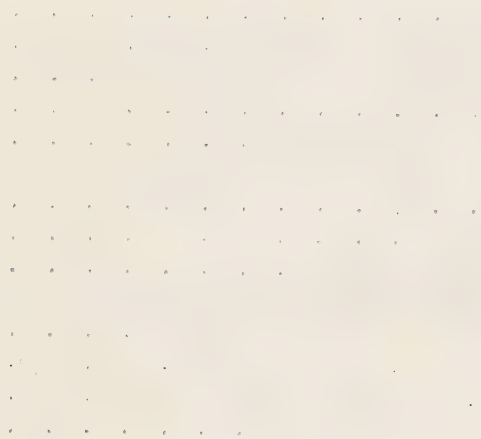

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INTRODUCTION

The teaching of Christian perfection has been challenged most vigorously by that majority of the church which has been influenced by the fact of human depravity and sinfulness. The champions of this doctrine were men like Paul, Augustine, Luther, and Calvin.

In spite of such disagreement within the church itself the demand to holiness has never died out. In the Roman Catholic Church it has been a central doctrine since its early times. The contemporary Protestant emphasis on this need of the church has brought into focal points several facts which have made investigations urgently necessary.

Holiness teaching is found primarily in fundamentalist sects and not, as is frequently supposed, among idealistic rationalists. It has become quite evident that the doctrine of the Holy Spirit is but a washed out, insipid, boneless formula which by its great familiarity has somehow been misplaced into the shelf of antiques. But any revival of the church must begin with a revival of such a doctrine as this.

In recent times the theology of John Wesley has been reconsidered. Today there are several theologians who estimate his position as more important than in times past (cf. p. 44). Since Wesley based his doctrine of sanctification upon the New Testament and neo-orthodoxy emphasizes the need for a

return to the Bible we have encountered the idea of perfection anew in the Scriptures.

After defining biblical and modern terminology it is the object of this paper to show the repeated and constant concern about this idea in the church through the ages. This will automatically bring to light the great variety of its expression and its controversies with other doctrines. In our endeavor of finding the most general but also most basic concerns of the doctrine of Christian perfection we will investigate it in the New Testament setting. Then, to arrive at a relevant modern position we must take account of the present practical expressions and the contribution of recent theologians.

We may be forewarned that it is the intention of this thesis to show that Christian perfection is not the result of human, moral effort but rather of God's work in man.

The final question still remains: Is it advisable or necessary to maintain such a controversial conception as Christian perfection?

CHAPTER I

RUDIMENTARY: CLARIFICATION OF TERMS

If we search for an accurate meaning of perfect and perfection we find almost as many definitions as there are dictionaries. However, it is necessary to develop its most essential and basic meaning at the beginning. I shall, therefore, set forth its general meaning for today as well as the apostolic and New Testament conception where it specifically refers to Christian perfection.

The stem of the word seems to have one or both of the following Latin roots: perficere; to accomplish, to carry to the end, to perform; and facere, to do, make. Thus, The Webster's New International Dictionary (Second edition) defines perfection as the "quality or state of being perfect, or complete or high excellence; thorough knowledge or skill. . ." but also "the act or process of perfecting."[1] Christian Perfection is defined by another source as "the relative perfection attainable by man, in distinction from the absolute perfection of God. . ."[2]

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[1] in loc.

[2] Funk and Wagnalls New Standard Dictionary of the English Language, in loc.

Since God is usually not looked upon as being made, his perfection needs particular examination. Traditionally, Hartshorne says, God's perfection may be "explained as the total absence of 'defects,' or the presence of all possible positive values."[1] In this sense he would be continuously realizing himself and his own end. In recent time theologians have spoken of a "dynamic perfection" of God arising out of the growing desire to picture the creator as a person and not a static object. This latter perfection would permit mutability within the perfect although, as Hartshorne emphasizes, this change is only "toward more values."[2] Since Christian perfection is primarily understood in relation to God this may become crucial in an understanding of such attainment. To view God as perfect knowledge, power, presence, and even goodness, is to give assurance to his creatures; but it does not do justice to His creativity as displayed in the universe.

How vague the conceptions of religious perfection can be is shown by its definition as "the complete realization of . . . religious possibilities in personal experience."[3] This and similar definitions will soon lead us into a maze of relativities and inter-relativities which lack any foundation. In order

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[1]Vergilius Ferm, An Encyclopedia of Religion (New York: The Philosophical Library, 1945), p. 573.

[2]Ferm, loc. cit.

[3]Shailer Mathews (ed.), A Dictionary of Religion and Ethics (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1921), p. 331.

to find such a foundation we must turn to the Christian tradition and analyse their conceptions.

In the Old Testament the word appears as תָּמִים, tamim, its root being the verb taman which is usually translated: to finish, to complete, to perfect.[1] The first man to be described as perfect is Noah. We read: "Noah was a just man, [and] perfect (tamim) in his generations, [and] Noah walked with God."[2] The same terminology is used to depict Abraham: ". . . the Lord appeared to Abram, and said to him, I am the Almighty God; walk before me and be thou perfect" (tamim).[3] The term, here, is used in the sense of "being upright and sincere in heart, and unblameable."[4]

Since the author of Hebrews came from a Hebraic-Greek tradition and was in all likelihood addressing Jews his evaluation of these two men in conjunction with the Old Testament passages above casts valuable light upon the subject.[5] Noah is called a righteous man because he feared and obeyed God. Through his unreserved singleheartedness -- which stood quite in contrast to the general corruption of his generation -- he

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[1]Samuel Franklin, A Critical Review of Wesleyan Perfection (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1875), p. 219.

[2]Gen. 6:9. [3]Gen. 17:1.

[4]Alexander Cruden, A Complete Concordance (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, n.d.), p. 436.

[5]Heb. 11: 7-10.

became a person of God's favor. The matter of obedience need not be slighted with Abraham for it is implicit throughout the narratives. More specifically he is known as the man of faith; he hoped and trusted where there was no logical reason for hope.

In both cases perfection is associated with walking with God or before God. This suggests a very personal relationship between God and men as well as adherence to some known standards of his will. Inasmuch as this is the period of oral tradition the divine will was known to them either by this tradition or they had received it as a personal revelation which in turn became a new stratum in succeeding oral tradition. Uprightness, here, appears to have some definite relationship to external or social morality. This is clear about Noah whose perfection is spoken of with reference to his generation or contemporaries -- as if their conception of impeccableness had something to do with his state.

In subsequent writings the idea of perfection -- often synonymous with righteousness -- was further expanded. The righteous man was considered a guide or example to the unrighteous: "The righteousness of the perfect shall direct his way."[1] Or again: "The path of the righteous (perfect) is as the light of dawn, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day."[2]

To strengthen this Jewish apprehension of perfectibility

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[1]Prov. 11:5. [2]Prov. 4:18.

we should note that the Septuagint -- the Jew looking through Greek eyes -- translates the phrase "be thou perfect" by "become thou blameless." Paul later employs the same word in several passages. For example, "Do all things without murmurings and disputings: that ye may be blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation."[1] What we had noted before is true in this context also, blamelessness is measured externally "as the fruit and proof of inward grace."[2]

In other Greek texts the Hebrew tamim is translated by τέλειος (teleios).[3] It is, therefore, well to turn our attention to the use of this word in the New Testament. Besides the rendering above two other Greek terms are translated as perfect in the English Authorized Version, namely, ἀκριβής (akribas) and ἄρτιος (artios).[4]

akribas is used in such places as Mt.2:7ff., Lk. 1:3, Acts 18:25f., 22:3, 23:15 20, Eph. 5:15 which the Revised English Authorized Version of 1885 translates variably with "accurate," "exact," and "careful." It is used in a compound term to denote a sect which was known for their rigorous and strict interpretation of the minute details of the Mosaic

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[1]Phil. 2:14-15.

[2]Franklin, op. cit., p. 230.

[3]Ibid., p. 461.

[4]James Hastings (ed.), Dictionary of the Apostolic Church (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1918), II, 165.

law (cf. Acts 26:5).[1]

Of more interest is the use of artios. In the early manuscripts of the church it is frequently employed as an opposite to "lame" or "mutilated." Thus, Calvin rendered it, in quo nihil est mutilum. In Paul's usage *e. g.* it would refer to the Christian man in whom is found "every gift of grace necessary for the discharge of the duties of the Christian calling."[2] Thayer gives its meaning as "fitted," "complete, perfect, [having reference apparently to 'special aptitude for given uses']."[3] Used with a prefix as καταρτίξειν it is often transliterated by "restore, make perfect," or "perfect." In this form it is expanded to describe the mending of nets,[4] referring to the restoration or repair of that which has deteriorated. In its connotation of completeness it occurs predominantly in passages where Paul depicts the harmonious working together of believers as a community of faith which stands in personal obedience to God.[5]

The most common Greek word that is translated by perfect in English, is teleios. According to Franklin it is

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[1]Joseph Henry Thayer, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1892), p. 83.

[2]Hastings, loc. cit.

[3]Thayer, op. cit., p. 75. [4]cf. Mt. 4:21.

[5]Hastings, loc. cit.

used some nineteen times in the New Testament.[1] It becomes even the more significant when we hear that it was employed in classical Greek since the time of Homer. Its scope of meaning is of fairly large range: "brought to its end, finished; wanting nothing necessary to completeness; perfect."[2] Thus, Paul uses it to describe the return of Christ which shall usher in the end of all things and also lead them to their perfect state.[3] It is interesting to note that the apostle is waiting for this consummation himself as a τέλειος admonishing others to be likeminded.[4] However, we must also note in v. 12 that he insists: "not that I have already obtained, or am already made perfect" (τετελείωμαι). Paul seems to speak of a relative and an absolute perfection.

We may clarify this last point by an apt summary of J. G. Tasker who says:

> Much misunderstanding would be prevented if due weight were always given to the root-meaning of this Greek adjective. It is derived from the substantive τέλος, which "does not, as is commonly supposed, primarily denote the end, termination, with reference to time, but the goal reached, the completion or conclusion at which anything arrives, either as issue or ending, and thus including the termination of what went before; or as result, acme,

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[1]Franklin, op. cit., p. 461.

[2]Thayer, op. cit., p. 618.

[3]Cf. I Cor. 13:10.

[4]Phil. 3:15.

> consummation . . . 'It never [. . .] denotes merely an end as to time, a termination in and for itself; for this, τελευτή is always used.'"[1]

We should not overlook that in the Johannine literature the perfecting in love does away with the enumeration of single Christian graces. Having learnt the root-meaning of perfection this love is not one of "superlative degree, but love that is consummated in action. . . the idea is that, not of qualitative, but effective perfection."[2]

One of the favorite devices of Paul which was later to be borrowed by the authors of Matthew,[3] I Peter,[4] and Hebrews,[5] was to distinguish between Christian converts as babes in Christ and full-grown fathers.

> Mature Christians are contrasted with babes in Christ, as in I Cor. 14:20, where, however, τέλειοι is translated "men" [. . .]. The significance of this anti-thesis is clearly stated by Westcott in his note on Heb. 5:14: "A man is said to be τέλειος who has reached the full possessions of his rights, his τέλος, his 'end.' This maturity, completeness, perfection may be regarded as generally or in some particular aspect. As compared with the child, the full grown man is τέλειος physically, intellectually, socially [. . .]; as compared with the fresh uninstructed convert, the disciplined and experienced Christian is τέλειος (ICor. 2:6, 14:20; Eph. 4:13; Phil. 3:15; Col. 1:28, 4:12; Jas. 1:4).[6]

Before we leave this introductory chapter some generalizations should be drawn from what has gone before.

In the Old Testament there are several phrases and

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[1]Hastings, op. cit., p. 166.

[2]Hastings, loc. cit.

[3]Mt. 11:25, 18:3.

[4]I Pet. 2:2.

[5]Heb. 5:14.

[6]Hastings, loc. cit.

terms[1] which express negative as well as positive completion or perfection. This culmination is most frequently an achievement of Yahweh's purpose. Secondly, its performance is usually realized within man. Thirdly, it is never a mere demonstration of a mature and finished man but always a man who *becomes* perfect through union with Yahweh, or more correctly the righteous man was to be an image of the righteous God.[2]

Both Testaments speak of Perfection in relation to the judgment of the peer group. However, accomplishment and achievement are often due to degeneration and need for repair.

Finally, in spite of all the modern contention, New Testament writers seem to find it helpful to distinguish between different levels or grades of perfection. Paul does not only speak of the different glories of earthly and heavenly bodies[3] but also searches for the end for which each is created. Completion, thus has to do with the fulfilment of intended purpose.

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[1]Beside the most important stem which we have discussed above (p. 5) Perkins enumerates four others: (1) בְּלָה which denotes "the accomplishment of a design" as f.i. Ps.69:96; "I have seen an end of all perfection," (2) כָּלַל which as conjunction describes perfection in beauty, (3) חֵרֶם which stands for the tabu or ban under which a war leader may pronounce his warriors, and (4) שָׁלוֹם which speaks of a tendency toward perfection in prosperity. cf. Harold William Perkins, The Doctrine of Christian or Evangelical Perfection (London: The Epworth Press, 1927), pp. 32f.

[2]cf. Perkins, op. cit., p. 52.

[3]I Cor. 15:40.

With this biblical terminology in mind it will now remain to be seen what the church throughout its course of history has believed and taught concerning Christian perfection.

As we had anticipated in the Introduction already, we must be prepared to meet with a great variety of concepts and understandings of the term. Since it is not the intention of this thesis to clarify and to interpret these various concepts, but rather to set forth a positive, relevant position it may suffice simply to enumerate those men and movements of the church which positively and for the sake of reference point consciously use the term "perfection" or in kindred terms set forth ideas and conceptions of attainment.

Perfection is variously spoken of as (1) being a divine attribute and, thus, only found in man as gift from God [cf. Augustine, pp. 30 ff.], (2) being attainable only in the afterlife [cf. Origen, pp. 25 f.], (3) applying only to the institution or office [cf. I Clement, pp. 13 f], (4) being essentially confessional [cf. Barnabas, p. 15], or (5) being personal and moral [cf. Shepherd of Hermas, pp. 14 f.].

All of these views and some others may stand in their own right. But as we continue with our method of investigation we shall find that Christian perfection is predominantly associated with one theme: God's forgiveness and love.

CHAPTER II

HISTORICAL POSITIONS

The Early Church

The non-mystical Fathers

Ignatius of Antioch was only one to share in the mystical Johannine tradition at the beginning of the second century. The literature of the non-mystical Fathers shows a decided break from the apostolic church. Christianity had become a religion of law much in the Judaic sense except that it was international in its appeal. Christ was the supreme lawgiver and judge to whom man could only respond in fear. Man arrived at this fear and an all-sufficient obedience through faith. Repentance, obedience and worship were the universal requirements of the law.[1]

Primarily, perfection at the beginning of this century seems to be found in the institution of the church and the perfect order of administration which was believed to be passed on from God to Christ and from Christ to the Apostles.[2]

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[1]Robert Newton Flew, The Idea of Perfection in Christian Theology (London: Oxford University Press, 1934), pp. 119f.

[2]Williston Walker, A History of the Christian Church (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1918), pp. 44-48.

Thus I Clement reads: "the church was created before the sun and moon were." He urges the bishops and deacons to "pass on this perfect order,"[1] which -- he was convinced -- had been handed down by on uninterrupted apostolic succession.

Clement of Rome is appealed to by the Church of Corinth to settle their divisions and quarrels. The Italian bishop was amazed at the mass of sins which jealousy and hatred could create in this church across the Adriatic. But he recalls to the Church its former faith, piety, and hospitality for which it was widely known and honored. Love alone can restore peace and orderliness to the congregation. He says:

> Love unites to God. By love all the elect of God have been made perfect; without love nothing is well pleasing to God. Those who have been perfected in love through the grace of God attain to the place of the godly. . . . How great and wonderful a thing is love, and there is no declaring its perfection.[2]

The Shepherd of Hermas has not given up the ideal of sinlessness in the Christian Church. Indeed, this is the main concern of his writing. With the epistle to the Hebrews and Irenaeus he opposed any postbaptismal repentance.[3] Where such a second repentance had already occurred he declared that subsequent perfection was possible and that the true Christian could indeed live far above the commands of Christ.[4] The

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[1] John Von Rohr, Lecture: "History of Christianity," 1956.

[2] Perkins, op. cit., p. 129. [3] Von Rohr, ibid.

[4] Flew, op. cit., p. 134.

church was a unique agency in the empire; it was loved and cherished by God who had created this world as a place for this ideal institution.[1]

The Epistle of Barnabas which enjoyed some affiliation with the growing New Testament canon in the East speaks of a veracious covenant people who become perfect through their knowledge that Judaism is rejected but Gentile Christianity is accepted by God.[2]

The unknown author of the letter to Diognetus (ca. 130-150 A. D.) elaborates this last view. Boldly he asserts that Christians hold a heavenly rather than earthly citizenship. As the soul is the integrating source of human life so the church is the activating and animating force of the world. Without this spiritual power the empires could not cohere.[3]

A last writing of the early Fathers must be given special attention, for it holds the first expression of a theme that was to become of major consequence in subsequent history. This are the Didache or Teaching of the Twelve Apostles; the theme it promoted was the double standard of

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[1]Perkins, loc. cit.

[2]Samuel Macauley Jackson, et al., (eds.), The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge (New York: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1908), I, 487.

[3]Perkins, op. cit., p. 129.

holiness.[1] The great variety of Christian followers is admonished:

> If thou art able to bear the whole yoke of the Lord, thou shalt be perfect; but if thou art not able, do that which thou art able.[2]

While externally this passage is concerned with the entire church it was especially devoted to those who would dedicate themselves to the highest goals of Christian achievement. Tertullian and Origen both encouraged such ideals and without being misunderstood spoke of the requirement and the advice of the gospel.[3] This emphasis was to lead eventually to celibacy and monasticism. Such aspirations as these were frequently supported by Scriptures:

> Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, shall be called least in the Kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, he shall be called great in the Kingdom of heaven.[4]

The Apologists: Justin Martyr

The Christian followers were soon charged with atheism, anarchy and arson by the Roman government. In the face of such persecution arose the literary defenders of Christianity called the apologists.

Aristides assures a Roman official that all Christians

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[1] William E. Sangster, The Pure in Heart: A Study in Christian Sanctity (New York: Abingdon Press, 1954), p. 43.

[2] Walker, op. cit., p. 103.

[3] Walker, loc. cit.

[4] Mt. 5:19.

live as God has commanded them. "All sins are far from them, and perfect purity is to be found among them . . . Christians pray for their unbelieving neighbours, and strive to win them from their error."[1] If a man repents from his disobedience to God and his ignorance he is instantly forgiven and his heart purified. Praise is sung to God when a child passes away for it has been untouched by the mire and filth of sin.

Not less vigorous in his intellectual defense was Athenagoras about whom little is known apart from his address to Marcus Aurelius. He contends that all Christians are looking forward to a Judgment Day; knowing that God is watching over them day and night they abstain from all sin and evil, but rather pray for their enemies and persecutors. They do not so much as think about the slightest sin which would exclude them from a glorious afterlife. Thus, the Christian is led to sinlessness by a sense of God's watchful, scrutinizing eye.[2]

A more boisterous and crude reply came from Tatian, a former native of Assyria. In his On Perfection according to the Doctrine of the Savior he attacks paganism and its devilish cults which he held to be the result of man's great fall. Now man can return to a pure monotheism and his original state of perfection and immortality through the redeeming Savior.[3]

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[1]Flew, op. cit., p. 134. [2]Flew, op. cit., p. 135

[3]Jackson (ed.), op. cit., II, 274f. "Nothing evil has been created by God; it is we who have produced what is bad; and what has been thus produced we can again renounce." Perkins, op. cit., p. 133.

No less attention ought to be given to the short but emphatic summaries of Theophilus, bishop at Antioch. He did not merely assert that God's plan of salvation was "that men may sin no more," but he testified that all external and mental sins are rooted out. The soul which was purified from sin in such a manner could indeed see God.[1]

Unquestionably the most powerful and heroic defender was Justin Martyr. For this reason he is frequently discussed as the type example of the apologists. Having been an ardent student of the various philosophies of his day he came to experience Christianity which from that moment he called the truest or most divine philosophy. At about 153 he addressed his apology to the Emperor Antoninus Pius in which he defended Christianity with the noblest dignity and distinction.[2]

He answered the official charges sentence for sentence. If the Christians were called atheists he replied that they were true monotheists but the Romans polytheistic and, therefore, atheists; if they were accused of being bad citizens he retorted that Rome could never desire any citizens of greater virtue and more full of love; if they were unjustly charged with immoral worship he simply opened all doors to the churches to disprove such accusation. He admitted that the Christian movement was comprised of proletarians -- former circus people, harlots, and kitchen workers -- but he insisted that it was here that God had found receptive and humble hearts. The

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[1]Flew, loc. cit.

[2]Walker, op. cit., pp.50f.

injunction that Christians were anti-intellectual he flatly denies; for, he asserted, they were intensely interested intellectually because they desired to follow the highest of all philosophies.[1] They were intent to find the power of God in Christ. This power lead them to a conversion from their old ways to a profound, new way on which they abstained from all wickedness and evil. The joyousness over their remission of sins spurred them to a sinless life borne and blessed by the unending goodness of God.[2]

Such were the sincere convictions of the early church leaders. It would be u just to brush them aside as extraordinary. On the contrary, we may conclude that this was the ideal hope of a large part of the church. That they were challenged by an opposing faction is also clear.[3] Nevertheless, I find an overwhelming tone of assurance that perfection was thought to be attained by several.

A second attempt to minimize these teachings must be set aside, at least temporarily. It is frequently argued that the ideal of sinlessness was a direct result of idealistic Greek philosophy which found a fertile soil for its speculative interests in the new religion. Martin Foss may serve as an example when he says:

> The idea of perfection is the basic idea of scientific systematization. No wonder that the

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[1]Von Rohr, ibid.

[2]Flew, op. cit., pp. 135f.

[3]Cf. Flew, loc. cit.

> scientific and systematic experiment to transform God into an intellectual entity and so to prove his existence logically has been based on the idea of perfection.[1]

Two warnings are relevant at this point. First, the idea of perfection is not the basic idea of scientific systematization alone. We have seen that a conception of perfection in the sense of completeness or full obedience in a God-man relationship has been promoted by biblical writers. This is but a plea to make the term more pliable so that it may include a larger realm than merely science and logic. This seems vital. If we are content to apply the concept of wholeness and integrity only to the realm of nature and law and not to the realm of spirit and personality we do violence to the purpose and aim of unity which even philosophy does not allow. To speak of perfection in these latter areas as symbols and metaphors as Foss suggests in his preface[2] is to miss a crucial point.

Secondly, it has become increasingly difficult -- if not impossible -- to separate Hebrew from Greek thought. With the conquests of Alexander the Great (ca. 330 B. C.) the diaspora of the Jews continued and a general Hellenization set in. Jesus was repeatedly sought out by Greeks,

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[1] Martin Foss, The Idea of Perfection in the Western World (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1946), p. 33.

[2] Foss, op. cit., p. 3.

and it is very likely that he spoke Greek himself.[1] Who could sincerely maintain that -- after subtracting the questionable sayings -- his interests in perfection were philosophical ideas?[2] What is true of him is also true of the young church. No doubt we can detect decided traits of philosophical interests. Indeed we are quite convinced that the apologists of the second century had a speculative background. But who, again, could prove that they created some new doctrine concerning Christian perfection?[3] It is more likely that they found seeds of such a belief in the church and merely passed them on in their own terms.[4]

After all this has been recognized, it will still remain necessary to examine the Alexandrian school which was so profoundly influenced by Platonism at a later time.[5]

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[1]cf. Jn. 1:42, where Peter is called Cephas (Gk.) by Jesus; Jn. 12:20, where a group of Greek worshippers have come to see Jesus; Mk. 7:46, where Jesus converses with a Greek woman; Mt. 8:5, where a centurion whom we expect to speak everyday-Greek comes to Jesus. Besides this, Gentile Galilee was known to have many Greek inhabitants.

[2]For example, Mt. 5:19 in which passage Jesus is referring to the rabbinic "light" and "heavy" precepts. (cf. The Interpreter's Bible, eds. G. Arthur Buttrick, et. al., (12 vols.; New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1951), VII, 292.

[3]The non-mystical fathers like the author of 1 Clement (ca. 100 A. D.), Clement of Rome (ca. 95 A. D.), Polycarp, and the author of the Didache had as little opportunity to be Greek philosophers as did Jesus.

[4]This, of course, was true of the opposite tradition: Augustine, impressed by Paul's view of the heritage of sin, and at the same time interested in general principles as a philosopher, developed the idea of original sin.

[5]cf. pp. 23f.

Iranaeus

Irenaeus of Lyon is the first Latin Father to develop a doctrine of salvation which joined both human merit and divine grace. Christian perfection in his understanding is brought about by God's act of immortalizing the human flesh. The fact of Christ's birth brought about by divine grace mystically accomplished man's change when the sacraments were administered to him. Thus, for the first time we find an explicit reference to an act of God in man's perfection.[1]

Montanism: Tertullian

The Montanist movement arose as a protest against the legal and organizational developments of the young church. Montanus in conjunction with the prophetesses Prisca and Maximilla declared that they were direct mouthpieces of the Spirit of God who had been curbed and rejected by the church. This emphasis of orthodoxy should not be overlooked, especially since the great Tertullian belonged to this party of moral rigorists.[2]

One question was: shall the church be a body of the saved and the pure or shall it be an organization among other worldly organisms? The Montanists clearly took their stand. Tertullian opposed Bishop Calixtus who took penitent adulterers, idolaters, and murderers back into his fold. Even with Cyprian who stressed high discipline and firm regulations

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[1] Cf. Fortino, op. cit., p. 100.

[2] Walker, op. cit., pp. 57-59.

Tertullian was not content, and asserted that the church was to be a "pure virgin,"[1] free from any double standard of morality.

However, Montanism could not stand up long beside the administrational power of the large church and soon disappeared. H. Wheeler Robinson was not begging the question when he said:

> A history of the doctrine [i.e. of the Holy Spirit] is apt to become a survey of the views of individual thinkers, and even these must often be elicited indirectly.[2]

Such early aspirations of the Montanists are in many ways not fulfilled again until -- in our era of religious liberty -- in the rise of Methodism and Quakerism.

Christian Platonism: Clement and Origen

The idea of a higher and a lower way of salvation is also expressed by Clement of Alexandria. To be sure the final goal of the Christian is never reached apart from faith and love; but the highest and noblest way to this goal is the way of the Christian gnostic. In his Stromata he calls these pursuers of knowledge the true, spiritual kernel of the larger church. They "keep on always moving to higher and yet higher regions,"[3] and are distinguished from other Christians by their complete sonship to God, their control over passion, and their entire rejection of sin.[4] How far this rejection

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[1] Perkins, op. cit., pp. 133 ff.

[2] Sangster, op. cit., p. 48.

[3] Perkins, op. cit., p. 140.

[4] Ibid., p. 144.

of desire, anger, and evil could be achieved is sometimes debated. However, he claims that it leads to complete sinlessness. He says:

> We are washed from all our sins, and are no longer entangled in evil. This is the one grace of illumination that our characters are not the same as before our washing.[1]

Repentance is a complete forsaking of sin, the life that ensues is the same kind of life which the apostles lived, it is characterized by love to the neighbor and sinlessness. "The entire life of men who have come to know Christ is good."[2]

The final stage the knower of God aspires to reach is the unbroken, beatific vision of God. This experience of the divine seems to have been a possession of Clement. He speaks of the tremendum of this mystic state but, not finding proper words to express it he concludes: "He who has seen it knows what I mean."[3] The intricate character of the vision is twofold: it abides with the viewer and gives rest and peace to the soul.

If this experience is reminiscent of the drama that Paul participated in before Damascus it also shows Plato's influences upon Clement. But here again we must note that he is not primarily a philosopher but a biblicist who brings out the agreement of Plato with the New Testament.[4] In all honesty he concludes: "If one will, one may dispense with the

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[1] Quoted by Flew, op. cit., p. 148.

[2] Flew, loc. cit.

[3] Ibid., p. 147.

[4] Ibid., p. 145.

preparation of philosophy, and may take the short cut to perfection, that of salvation by faith."[1]

Origen, the follower of Clement at the Christian school in Alexandria was far superior to his forerunner in intellectual precision. However, the doctrine of perfection is no longer central in his theology.

Speaking of sinlessness he debates two points of view; he seriously doubts, at one place, that one may reach sinlessness in thought, but at another place he is convinced that the prophets and apostles had reached such perfection. He is quite explicit that there are only few who attain, but he is uncertain whether there are any in his generation.[2] On the whole he is more pessimistic about human nature than Clement. He frequently speaks of the bodily sins and lusts which keep the soul in bondage. The soul can only be freed through contemplation beyond the material. But "there is no sudden break with sin . . . . The Stoic theory of progress is applied to the Christian conquest of moral evil, and it is progress to a definite goal."[3]

What, then, has become of the beatific vision of God? Interestingly enough he speaks of the vision of the Crucified and the cross and discovers some divine purpose in trial and suffering. Suffering is to a great extent brought upon man through his creatureliness which holds his soul captured.

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[1]Quoted by Perkins, op. cit., p. 145.

[2]Flew, op. cit., p. 155. [3]Flew, op. cit., pp. 153 f.

Since the soul is of divine origin and immortal it longs to be free from evil. God has made known his intention to help man through the sending of his son Jesus. Thus, the assurance for man's perfection lies in God; man could out deny his passions and struggle toward a final meeting with God.[1]

It is evident that the idea of perfection took on different meaning for Origen. He is the first one to speak of an absolute, abstract existence of perfection which lies beyond this world. This ultimate ideal was -- perhaps after Platonic fashion -- God. Nevertheless, it seems to me that Origin felt obligated to say something concerning human perfection because his generation thought in these terms. It was here that he wavered. He began to speak of <u>levels</u> of perfection and admitted that perchance few had reached its final step. But this achievement had nothing to do with the <u>kind</u> of perfection God was and, therefore, it became secondary in his thinking.

Monasticism

Origen with his persistent emphasis upon Christian virtue had greatly favored the double standard of morality. By the end of his life a "conspicuous element" had been added to the church, the holy virgins. "Men and women, without leaving their homes, were practicing asceticism."[2] Soon

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[1] Perkins, <u>op. cit.</u>, p. 154. This emphasis is strongly Pauline, except for the obvious separation of spirit and matter (soul and body) which is distinctly Platonic.

[2] Walker, <u>op. cit.</u>, p. 136.

monasticism was flourishing in the East and was copied by the West.

Having always felt a strange admiration for the monastic movement I find myself in unusual agreement with Flew's evaluation. Not only have the hermit and monk been ridiculed and scorned for their anti-socialism but also for their insistance upon perfection. However, neither one of these is incompatible with Christianity today if they are examined in their original intention.

First, it is necessary to understand that the movement was not a mere imitation of earlier Egyptian or Buddhist monasticism. On the contrary, it found its very beginnings in the New Testament and the alleged teachings of Christ.[1] Flew recalls in his chapter how Athanasius reports the intense experience of Anthony the first Anchorite. Being a parishoner of the bishop's church he was continually plagued by his self-reproach, decrepit and corrupt life.[2] One day when Athanasius preached on the advice of Jesus to the rich young ruler[3] Anthony found his long-desired task. He sold his possessions and in doing so found freedom from the snares of this world. "His aim was to attain inward perfection; he set himself to win

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[1]Flew, op. cit., pp. 160f. Observing that "monasticism is a living force in the Church of the present day," the author deems it important to estimate the movement neither by the investigation of any one saint nor entirely by its actual realization but rather by some evaluation of its ideals.

[2]No one wants to call such feeling of unworthiness pagan.

[3]Mt. 19:21, "If you would be perfect [italics mine], go sell what you possess and give to the poor. . ." (R.S.V.).

the virtues he had seen in others, and by ceaseless prayer to win fellowship with God."[1] It is, therefore, quite correct when the author concludes on his next page: "If St. Anthony is typical, it is at Christian perfection that monasticism aims."

Prayer, then, and conversation with God was the aim of this part of the church. Even in our social minded world we must confess that the hermit was somewhat profound when he said: "Life too is a lonely business."[2] The partial failure of the social gospel has taught us that in all social relatedness it is still the individual man who must confront God and give answer to him. Again we may criticise the monk for his undue chastisement of his body and flesh as evil. But, I ask, was it not the Christian tradition that taught man that undue regard of the creature rather than the creator was an immense idolatry? If we today hesitate to speak of soul and body as separate entities and prefer to talk about the "wholeness" of person this wholeness must still strive to meet God as the soul of the monk did.

But what about perfection? It seems evident that we are squarely confronting that tradition of the church which had some faith in the attainment of goodness rather than evil. Most certainly the monks were not unaware of sin; but they also discovered man's ability to do good, to be virtuous. If evil had been brought about by man's denial of God it could be

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[1] Cf. Flew, op. cit., p. 158.

[2] Ibid., p. 162.

overcome by virtues that God had implanted and hidden within man. Thus, the soul could be compared to a feather which -- if unweighted by any dew -- would by its very nature rise to lofty and divine heights.[1]

Criticism of the monastic understanding of perfection is not as easy as some would make it. The end of the askesis -- a long process -- is a final attainment, to be sure. However, it does not merely consist in a cool, Stoic denial of passions and evil thoughts but rather in a denial of any confidence in man whatever. It is a union and communion with God. It is God that matters, not man.

In spite of this it is quite significant that some misinterpreted the meaning of attainment. Since man worked his way to God and every individual reached a different expression of his destiny some unanimity was attempted. The attempt however failed when Jambo decided that two men who had given away all of their possessions in two quite different ways were equal before God.[2] Compared with Origen's idea of "levels of perfection" this was a new emphasis: man could achieve perfection but no uniform expression of it ought to be expected.

Augustine's summum bonum

Ambrose, the spiritual father of Augustine, presents in many aspects a continuation of the general conviction of the ancient church. If we do find a new note in him this is

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[1] Ibid., p. 166. [2] Ibid., p. 178.

expressed more clearly in Augustine, and we shall do well to examine him more closely.[1]

Augustine who may be called the doctor of universal Christendom so developed our doctrine that Christianity even today is guided by his thought. Because he developed his doctrine of sin and salvation from his own stormy experience it has always been especially appealing. Speaking of holiness and final attainment he cannot help but repeat again and again the relevance of the Lord's prayer to the question. Here, he says, it is necessary to note that the prayer was given to Christians. Why, then, were they admonished to pray daily "Forgive us our debts" if they had committed no sins?[2] If the Christian man had daily need to confess his tresspasses against God's will we might expect a quick dismissal of any theology of perfection. Indeed, this has been the conclusion of many sincere students of Augustine as Flew observes.[3]

This position is strengthened when we follow Augustine's heated controversies with the Pelagians and Donatists. Pelagius had virtually said: "If I ought I can.":

> As often as I have to speak of the principles of virtue and a holy life, I am accustomed first of all to call attention to the capacity and character of human nature and to show what it is able to accomplish; then from this to arouse the feelings of the hearer, that he may strive after different kinds of virtue.[4]

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[1]Perkins, op. cit., pp. 158-61.

[2]Augustine sees no reason for distinguishing between debts or tresspasses and sins.

[3]Flew, op. cit., p. 195. [4]Walker, op. cit., p. 185.

This hopeful and joyous view of human nature promoted the rather unformulated perfectionist ideas of men like Justin Martyr[1] and Clement of Alexandria.[2] The Augustinian-Pelagian controversy ended with a council at Carthage (418) in which the Augustinian view was affirmed: sinlessness in this life is impossible.[3]

No better fared the Donatists who contended that the holiness of the church was found in an impeccable and perfect clergy who were free from any moral stain.[4] Augustine vigorously discounted such claims and defended the position that holiness is not found in moral personality but in the sacraments and offices of the universal church.[5]

In spite of these incisive affirmations we find that Augustine is a fervent defender of Christian perfection. If he opposes one view of perfection and at the same time sets forth a different view we ought to be challenged to spell out the difference of the two.

Firstly, Augustine is assured that the daily cleansing from sin is a perfect purgation which of course brings a momentary immaculateness.[6] Perfection is, therefore, experienced and enjoyed in the present life. It leaves a soothing effect

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[1]cf. pp. 18f. [2]cf. pp. 23f.

[3]cf. Walker, op. cit., p. 187.

[4]Ibid., pp. 113 and 114

[5]Philip Schaff (ed.), A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church (Buffalo: The Christian Literature Company, 1887), pp. 397-99 and 432f.

[6]Perkins, op. cit., p. 162.

upon the restless, searching soul of man.[1] But this points us secondly -- and without any doubt -- to the source of Christian purity: God. Thirdly, inasmuch as God is the author the fullness of perfection cannot be achieved until eternity.[2]

To press the question farther involves a crucial examination of Augustine as a philosopher. For a fuller discussion I would like to refer to another writer.[3] Here, we may only observe that Augustine belonged to the ancient church and not to the Middle Ages. His contribution was that of a new Christian ethic, the summum bonum, joined to a Christian piety which had little to do with a Neo-Platonic view of God[4] and sin.[5] God was rather active and creative will who in a real sense could animate man and override all that was in opposition to His will, the final good.

The crucial point in this ethic is clearly the participation of man. To be sure, God does the work but man must know and understand this in order to find relief from his wretchedness. In this sense, then, he can say:

> This is life eternal, that they may know Thee, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent . . . . We shall be like Him. . . . This likeness begins even now to be re-cast in us, while the inward man is being renewed from day to day, according to

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[1]Flew, op. cit., p. 193 [2]Schaff, loc. cit.

[3]Ibid., pp. 197-200.

[4]i.e., a God who is a removed abstract, the ultimate good.

[5]Strictly, the absence of goodness.

the image of Him.[1]

Some students have correctly observed that Augustine states repeatedly: no one is perfect in this life. But we cannot endorse this without calling to attention some ambiguity and contradiction of Augustine at this point. Indeed, Augustine may be called a perfectionist at heart. More than once he speaks of a positive "human perfection." Only we must not overlook that such perfection in this life is relative;

> . . . that is to say in the measure of human perfection in which perfection is possible in this life. . . . The measure is that of the perfection of which this life is capable, and not as those promises are to be fulfilled in that day of perfect peace when it shall be said: Ubi est mors contentio tua?[2]

One cannot leave Augustine without noting that he coordinated and brought together all Christian thought that was voiced before him. It is quite possible that -- once we know his understanding of perfection -- he is one of the greatest perfectionists. His essential understanding of purity may be summed up in short form: to the Christian it is clear that all things have their beginning and end in the creator; goodness and perfection have no meaning whatever apart from God and are, therefore, present in him in their fullness; man, therefore, cannot speak of his own perfection. He can neither speak of various kinds of perfection nor does it make sense to speak of less perfection and more perfection.

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[1] Flew, op. cit., p. 198. [2] Ibid., p. 208.

Transitions toward the Modern Understanding

Augustine had spoken so thoroughly and convincingly on the subject that no significant additions were made over a long period. Even Bernard of Clairvaux whose greatest spiritual joy was "the mystic contemplation of Christ" rather than God[1] added little new insight to the query.

The next scholar to bring a reconstruction is Thomas Aquinas of the scholastic age. Since he is the singular doctor and saint Par excellence of the church of Rome it is well to outline his position clearly. We are aware that Aquinas described man as consisting of nature and a superimposed supernature. In his fall man lost his supernature and suffered impairment of his nature, thus, being unable to live up to his divinely purposed end, namely to see God. Although man could still achieve some basic virtues it was primarily God's prima gratia which could restore man to his place.[2]

Knowing this we might easily suppose that all perfection is found in God as Augustine had maintained. But this is not exclusively so. Aquinas finds much value in setting forth several definite levels or stages of perfection. Reading Mt. 5:48[3] he observes that there is no divine law which requires the impossible of man. Indeed he finds in the Scriptures requirements of varying degrees which may fit the particular moral

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[1] Walker, op. cit., p. 246 [2] Ibid., pp. 272f.

[3] "You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." (R.S.V.).

state of any man intent to find God. He says:

> The perfection of the Christian life consists in charity. Now, perfection implies a certain universality because the perfect is that which lacks nothing [italics mine]. Hence we may consider a threefold perfection. . . . Absolute perfection consists in loving God as much as he is lovable. Such perfection as this is not possible to any creature; for God alone can love himself in this way, that is to say, infinitely. Another perfection consists in loving God to the extent of our power, so that our love always actually tends to God. Such perfection as this is not possible in this life, but we shall have it in heaven. Finally there is a third perfection which consists in loving God not as much as he is lovable, nor in always actually tending to Him, but to the exclusion of whatever is opposed to the love of Him. [. . .] On earth this perfection can exist, and that in two ways. Man may exclude from his affection all that is contrary to charity, and which would destroy it, such as mortal sin. This is necessary to salvation. Secondly, man may exclude from his affection not only, what is contrary to charity, but also whatever hinders his love from being directed completely toward God. Without this perfection, charity can exist, for instance, in beginners and in proficients.[1]

Man may set his feet upon the road to perfection by being charitable, for love is the bond of perfection.[2] It is true that love is infused by God but man's exercise of this love will lead him to an uncompromising state, contemplation. There is no question that this is the unmatched ideal toward which Aquinas points at all times. The ideal Christian is the man of contemplation. Indeed it is quite proper to speak of a hierarchy of perfection, for there is

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[1] R. Garrigou-Lagrange, trans. M. Timothea Doyle, Christian Perfection and Contemplation: According to St. Thomas Aquinas and St. John of the Cross (London: B. Herder Book Co., 1937), p. 180.

[2] Col. 3:14.

in existence a hypothetical ladder, the last rung of which represents the contemplative or "religious state."[1] Next to this category of people stand the secular priests. The lower rungs are occupied by people of the secular realm and parishoners. It is very desirable that all strive for the higher ranks.

> While beginners strive above all to flee sin, to resist the movements of concupiscence . . . and proficients direct their principle efforts toward advancing in the practice of charity and of the other virtues . . . the perfect tend, above all, to unite themselves with God, to adhere to Him, to enjoy Him. They desire to die in order to be with Christ.[2]

It is quite clear, then, that a relative perfection which is expressed through heroism in virtues leads to a complete sanctity which is marked by "perfect purity, immutable union with God." In this, the mysticism of the Middle Ages stands far above asceticism which was primarily concerned to spell out the way to a final, impressive experience.[3] Thomism is careful to prescribe the road to such attainment[4] as well, but it is likewise intent to emphasize full sanctity and complete perfection as a permanent state of the mature Christian. It is important to understand the extent of sinlessness of the perfect. Sinlessness is not numerical; rather it has to do with man's faithfulness and obedience to the Holy Spirit. Inasmuch as man is always frail and taken by surprise he will at times

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[1] Flew, op. cit., p. 238.

[2] Garrigou-Lagrange, op. cit., pp. 169f.

[3] Ibid., p. 178.

[4] It is essentially meritorious, sacramental and mystical.

stagger into mortal sins which he would not choose knowingly and consciously. Although such sins may be venial they are not intended by the person but rather they denote a limitation of human capacity.[1]

Although Thomas Aquinas was an Aristotelian it is interesting to evaluate him simply as a Christian schoolman. If the philosopher will remember that in the question of the reality of universals Aquinas took the critical position of the moderate realist who affirmed that the particular was to some degree[2] representative of the universal he will be greatly aided in understanding him. Maintaining that universals were in re Aquinas asked inversely: how can the Christian have any knowledge of perfection unless it existed in some degree within himself? Expressed in other words this meant: if God was perfect, this was totally irrelevant to man unless he possessed a measure of such perfection. It was quite possible to defend the statement that "man, even from his birth, has a certain essential perfection by which he belongs to the human species."[3] Likewise, the man who for the first time encounters God's love consciously is made perfect at that moment through loving God. But he must be compared to a small child who -- though perfect in bodily form -- must develop into a man, and this not "under pain. . . of remaining a child but of becoming a deformed dwarf."[4]

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[1]Garrigou Lagrange, op. cit., p. 168.

[2]Not fully.

[3]Aquinas quoted by Garrigou-Lagrange, op. cit., p. 166.

[4]G.-Lagrange, loc. cit.

It seems to me that this concept has been and still remains quite helpful to a large part of the Christian church. We must not simply oppose the idea of perfection by deducing that it stands in contradiction to growth. Such a deduction is false. Rather it must be affirmed that one essential character of perfection is growth. Secondly, the term is an inclusive rather than exclusive one. Although its nature includes a sense of arrival it also has a number of further implications one of which is progress and another one of which is the groping for man's destiny.[1] It is for this reason[2] that we do not wish to dismiss the conception of perfection.

Perfectionists like Augustine and Aquinas deny vigorously that there is a stage of absolute arrival beyond which one simply needs to float on the grace of God. In this they are in agreement with modern psychology which has observed that growth does not terminate at any point but is continued as R. W. White summarizes:

> Organic growth and repair have their counterpart in the personality in the process of renewal: a continued making over of ideas and attitudes, of sentiments and plans, so that the person will overcome the animal tendency of repetition,

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[1] Although the emphasis upon arrival would be opposed to the thesis of Horace Bushnell and others who maintained that a child may grow into a Christian without knowing the time at which he became Christian, it would not be opposed to the crisis or encounter theology which emphasises the tremendum and distinctiveness of conversion.

[2] Namely, that it is a comprehensive term.

fixation, automatism.[1]

The understanding of perfection up to this point seems to fall short at two points. On the one hand the intellectual and contemplative rather than the active life of man is regarded as the most excellent way to see God.[2] This stands in contrast to the Protestant teaching of the priesthood of all believers and the sacredness of the secular. Although Catholicism is intent to lead all believers to sanctity through the mind it remains to be seen what becomes the main road to perfection for the Protestant.

On the other hand an intense preoccupation with perfection beyond death tends to lead to speculations that distort rather than clarify the concept. That this tension is realized is seen in the meticulous care that is taken to separate the two. Since the Christian church universal lacks a precise doctrine of the afterlife the danger of becoming confused is accelerated, especially since we have seen that perfection is concerned with the destiny of man. In subsequent historical positions this tension will come to a focal point.

The Reformation period itself was not a period of transition. Calvin and Luther had little to say on the question and were opposed to the extreme expressions of the Anabaptists. It is possible that the mild, conciliatory Melanchthon attempted to smooth over the crude expressions

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[1]Robert W. White, Lives in Progress: A Study of the Natural Growth of Personality (New York: The Dryden Press, 1952), p. 327.

[2]Flew warns us, not to identify contemplation with our modern understanding of intellectual activity. The former always has a vital passion of love within, op. cit., p. 345.

of Luther at this point as well as others and we may actually become convinced that Luther deemed a sensible presentation of Christian perfection necessary.[1] More important than this, however, is the general spirit of the Reformation. With the abandonment of the intensely sacramental, mystical, and hierarchical categories the meaning of perfection had to be reinterpreted.

Before we turn to Pietism we must cast a quick view upon a small, peculiar movement of the seventeenth century which arose in the church of Rome and expressed this spirit of Protestantism. Miguel Molinos was a mystic and saint who "taught nothing new, nothing which had not been taught by the mystics of St. Victor, by John Tauler or Henry Suso, by Theresa of Spain or Catherine of Siena."[2] He taught that meditation must not be confused with contemplation, the latter of which only can lead to perfection. Interesting are also his recollections of the three silences: the silence of words, the silence of desires, and the silence of thought, each of which is a stage of perfection.[3]

His holy life and disinterested piety won him a large circle of distinguished friends and followers in the city of Rome. Subsequently, Pope Innocent XI appointed him

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[1] Flew, op. cit., pp. 248-51. cf. for example pp. 101 f.

[2] J. Henry Sporthouse, Golden Thoughts from The Spiritual Guide of Miguel Molinos the Quietist (Glasgow: David Bryce & Son, 1883), p. 5.

[3] cf. Ibid., pp. 122-24.

papal spiritual counselor. In spite of this, he was excommunicated and his life ended at the age of seventy after long years of imprisonment in a dark cell. His ardent followers were persecuted and killed by fierce Jesuit inquisitors. Why had all this come about? The answer is a simple one. Molinos and the Quietists had chosen to seek mystic, personal perfection without due regard to the church. "They seldom went to mass. . . they spent little upon masses for the soul of deceased relations and friends; and, above all, they neglected the confessional." This was quickly criticised: "If God may be met in the silence of the believer's soul, where is there room for the priest. . .?"[1]

Although Molinos had denied none of the doctrines of the church he was excommunicated for his indifference to them and his failure to follow the prescribed road to holiness.

Pietism

Pietism was a direct consequence of the Reformation movement. When Lutheranism had become scholastic and rigidly dogmatic it became its own judge in the outgrowth of Pietism. Even since its early beginning the movement has resisted all tendencies to separation. It has rather remained an independent ferment in the church as a whole which is claimed to have decided effects on theology even today.[2] Walter Michaelis

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[1] Ibid., p. 18.

[2] A very recent example of this is Otto Schmitz (ed.), Pietismus und Theologie: Beiträge zu ihrer Verständigung (Kreis Moers: Verlag der Buchhandlung des Erziehungsvereins Neukirchen, 1956).

for example shows its direct responsibility for keeping alive the idea of the gnädige Gott (God of grace), as well as the doctrine of sanctification.[1] In practical or applied theology it emphasized the need of conversion, of missionary service, private Bible reading. The Pietist interest in the individual promoted the creation of small interest groups within the church, for example the Sunday School, the Young Mens' Fellowship, the Student Movement. The latter became known by their Christian witness in the universities.[2]

Luther had said that man was simul iustus et peccator. When Lutheranism became rationalistic in subsequent decades it insisted so much upon divine imputation of righteousness that it found excuses for grievous immoralities. Pietism counteracted this tendency in stressing the continual, living presence of the Spirit with those He had justified. But it is important to note that Pietism was non-moralistic and non-legalistic in its intention.

Perhaps, some of the emphases most lacking today are made by modern pietism. Karl Heim shows that the human authority which stands behind tradition may at times be seriously doubted. What the Christian needs most urgently today is the personal "edifying testimony" (erwecklich Zeugnis) of the Spirit of God. This he calls with Friedrich Strauss "Achilles heel of Protestantism." Whenever the truth of this divine testimony is shaken, whenever the miracle does not actually occur the door to a truly biblical knowledge

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[1] Ibid., p. 122.

[2] Ibid., pp. 122-25.

of God is barred.[1] How much this conviction is needed in our day cannot be stressed enough. In all of our preaching and teaching it is not the clever wording, the masterful competence, not even our artful dexterity which works the miracle of rebirth but the Spirit of God. It is God who is choosing our skills and techniques not man choosing God. However, inasmuch as God's purpose is realized most fully only in mutual cooperation between God and man it becomes quite desirable for the minister to experience the testimony of the Spirit in himself and joyfully choose God.[2]

Pietism guards itself against the error of spiritual ecstaticism by the observation that the Spirit has bound himself to God's Word. This cautions us at a second point. Our Protestant generation has been eager to affirm repeatedly that the will of God is expressed in history and may be found in tradition; we are inclined to think of "heretics" as great contributors. Pietism emphasizes the need of re-evaluating tradition in the light of personal experience. This again is insisted upon by modern depth psychology which finds it necessary that the individual be not only acted upon by his environment but that he ought to influence his environment.[3]

This neglect of the place and work of the Holy Spirit

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[1] Ibid., pp. 32-34.

[2] It seems to be the presumption of Pietism that the Word of God can only be passed on by those who are constantly aware of being used by God (Ibid., p. 35). This is a valuable emphasis. Although it does not agree with Paul who says at one place that he rejoices whenever Christ is preached even if in envy, strife, or pretense (Phil. 1:15-18). It reminds us that he too promoted a consecrated ministry (cf. Acts 20:28; Phil. 1:1-6; I Tim. 3:1-2; Titus 1: 7-8).

[3] White, op. cit., p. 103.

was also a major concern of John Wesley to which we shall turn next.

John Wesley

The estimates of the contributions of John Wesley differ with every biographer. While the majority holds that his greatest influence lay in the field of practical religion an increasing number of scholars have shown that his contributions to theology are of no small importance.[1] Myrs who is convinced that Wesley is no less a theologian than he is evangelist[2] goes on to say: "Wesley argued from the facts of Christian experience. As a philosopher, he analysed and synthesized the contents of his consciousness and that of Christian persons, together with its results in character and conduct."[3] Besides noting his empirical approach it is important to understand the historico-theological setting. His period was marked by the rationalism of the deists which brought with it a meticulous concern over morality. But in spite of the intellectual sophistication and the idealism in the realm of virtue, popular moral life was very low.[4] It was doubtlessly for this reason that the English reformer prefaced his one hundred and forty sermons with these words:

I abstain from all nice and philosophical speculations;

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[1]Lindstrom, op. cit., pp. 2-11.

[2]C. Myrs, John Wesley: Christian Philosopher and Church Founder (London: The Epworth Press, 1936), pp. 16-18.

[3]Ibid., p. 131. [4]Walker, op. cit., p. 507.

> from all perplexed and intricate reasonings; and, as far as possible, from even the show of learning.[1]

Characterizing his approach in another place he says:

> Religion is the most plain, simple thing in the world. It is only, "We love Him, because he first loved us." So far as you add philosophy to religion, just so far you spoil it.[2]

If we remember that these words come from the lips of a man who had taken great advantage of the higher education of his day this may add even more weight to his point of view. His gospel was a recall to biblical Christianity, and in this we are interested today.

It is rather unfair of Sangster to open his discussion on Wesleyan perfection by pointing out Wesley's uncertain, insecure, "oscillating, weary," and "confused" statements concerning the subject. Such negative first steps may lead us to the premature conclusion that John was somewhat indecisive, unsure, aimless, and even bewildered and doubtful concerning his new teaching.[3] But on the contrary, Wesley was quite certain about his approach in the beginning. When for example a good friend of his asked if it would be more <u>advisable</u> to speak of "a high state of grace" rather than perfection, he replied in a letter:

> As to the word, it is scriptural; therefore neither you nor I can in conscience object against it, unless we would send the Holy Ghost to school and teach Him to speak who made the tongue.[4]

In another letter in 1756 he said:

> When I began to make the Scriptures my study (about

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[1] Quoted by William E. Sangster, <u>The Path to Perfection: An examination and restatement of John Wesley's Doctrine of Christian Perfection</u> (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1943), p. 23.

[2] <u>Ibid</u>., p. 22.

[3] <u>Ibid</u>., pp. 79-81

[4] <u>Ibid</u>., p. 78.

> seven and twenty years ago) I began to see that Christians are called to love God with all their heart, and to serve Him with all their strength, which is precisely what I apprehend to be meant by the Scriptural term "perfection". . . . I therein build on no authority, ancient or modern, but the Scripture.[1]

Those who contend that Wesley changed his opinion about what perfection meant will still find his use the term decisively and without regret in 1770. He writes:

> I had once the opportunity of speaking a few minutes to you on the head of Christian perfection; and I believe you had not much objection to anything which was then spoken. . . . I believe verily, there would need no more than a single hour. . . to convince you that none can rationally or Scripturally say anything against the perfection I have preached for thirty years.[2]

It is, therefore, no more *à propos* when Wood concludes:

> It will be noticed in these expositions and statements of Mr. Wesley, given during forty years of his ministry that he used the term "perfection," "Christian perfection," "sanctification," "entire sanctification," "perfect love," and "holiness," interchangably and as synonymous; implying the same gracious state of deliverance from all sin, and love to God with all the heart.[3]

Before entering upon the numberless controversies such preaching and teaching aroused we must investigate in what sanctification[4] consisted for Wesley.

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[1]John Wesley, The Works of the Rev. John Wesley (14 vols.; fourth ed.; London: John Mason, 1840-42), XI, 431.

[2]J. A. Wood (ed.), Christian Perfection as taught by John Wesley (Boston: McDonald & Gill, Publishers, 1885), p. 26.

[3]Ibid., p. 28.

[4]Some have objected to the use of "entire sanctification." But Lindstrom has shown that in principle Wesley distinguished sanctification from entire sanctification, the former being used in the sense of Paul of those who are justified but not yet perfected. In practice this destinction is not always made (Op. cit., p. 127).

First, perhaps, it must be said that it was a second, instantaneous experience of the Christian. It was not intended for those who were not regenerated. He need only scan the number of sermon excerpts compiled by Wood to see that sin was only "suspended" but "not destroyed"[1] in those who had repented. The root of sin was still within and, therefore, caused unexpected appearances sooner or later.[2] But these roots were removed in the act of sanctification:

> I have so often explained this, that I cannot throw away time in adding any more now; only this -- that the moment a sinner is justified, his heart is cleansed in a low degree. But yet he has not a clean heart, in the full, proper sense, till he is made perfect in love.[3]

Secondly, it was John Wesley's conviction that this miracle which was wrought in the heart of believers was always fully realized by the individual. The Spirit of God bore testimony to this. Thus, John questioned his parishioners:

> Have you ever received a clear, direct witness that you was saved from inbred sin? At what time? In what manner?[4]

Thirdly, as we have seen above already, perfection meant freedom from sin. He says at times that the sanctified cannot sin,[5] for instance: "A Christian is so far perfect, as not to commit sin."[6] We are not left uncertain on this point.

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[1] Ibid., p. 31. (Wesley, op. cit., VIII, 316. Here, Wesley shows that gradual perfection occurs from the point of regeneration on until the complete, instantaneous experience in sanctification. Another summary of this is found in XI, 365.)

[2] Ibid., pp. 29-38.

[3] Ibid., p. 36.

[4] Sangster, Path to Perfection. . ., p. 86.

[5] Ibid., p. 80.

[6] Flew, op. cit., p. 325.

He does not speak of "suppression" or "suspension" of sin but of "eradication" and "extinction":

> I use the word "destroyed" because St. Paul does; "suspended" I cannot find in my Bible.[1,2]

Only in his later years was he forced to make a long desired distinction between voluntary and involuntary sin:

> A person filled with the love of God is still liable to these involuntary transgressions. Such transgressions you may call sins, if you please; I do not, for the reasons above mentioned.[3]

This statement reveals his concept of sin which must be understood if we wish to comprehend his teaching.[4]

Fourthly, the heart that is emptied of sin is filled with love. Indeed, it is love that brings about perfection:

> By Christian perfection, I mean (as I have said again and again) the so loving God and our neighbor as to "rejoice evermore, pray without ceasing, and in everything give thanks."[5]

There is little doubt that Wesley followed in the steps of medieval mysticism at this point. All too frequently he speaks of imitating Christ, loving our neighbor and God wholeheartedly, and having purity of intention.[6] This love of God also enables man to grow in his devotion to God and service to man. Wesley is far from denying creative growth beyond the point

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[1] Sangster, Path to Perfection . . ., p. 82.

[2] When he says: "Sinless perfection I do not contend for, seeing it is not scriptural" Flew explains that he means to say: "the actual adjective 'sinless' is never used in the New Testament to qualify perfection." (Flew, op. cit., p. 335-note 4)

[3] Flew, op. cit., p. 327. [4] For this see p. 61.

[5] Wood, op. cit., p. 25. This love is not merely infused by God but a result of "the complying of that kind command, 'My son, give me thy heart'" (Wesley, op. cit., VI, 509).

[6] Lindstrom, op. cit., p. 151.

of sanctification.

A second characteristic of the presence of love is the keeping of God's commandments. The heart is so completely cleansed from envy, wrath, and temper, and so completely possessed by the fire of God's love that it has focussed its attention entirely upon him, doing his will. It seems as if the will of God has changed after the fall of man. Wesley thought it impossible to obtain to the pre-Adamic requirement of obedience. Rather the sanctified man lived by the law of faith. But, since all humanity was infected with certain limitations and defects the pre-Adamic law could not be fulfilled. These shortcomings were unavoidable and could not be called sins but only mistakes. It is the law of Christ which man is able to fulfil today.[1] Although the movement was at times accused of being of otherworldly orientation because of this preoccupation with the will of God they lacked nothing in the social work of their time.[2]

Fifthly, it is quite important to mention that those in the state of achievement can fall from their perfection and become sinful again. Wesley says:

> Sometimes suddenly, but oftener, by slow degrees, they have yielded to temptation; and pride and anger, or foolish desires, have again sprung up in their hearts. Nay, sometimes they have utterly lost the life of God, and sin hath regained dominion over them.[3]

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[1]Wesley, op. cit., VI, 388-90. Cf. Lindstrom, op. cit., pp. 146f. and 150f.

[2]Gangster, Path to Perfection. . ., p. 98.

[3]Wood, op. cit., p. 115.

But it was not impossible for such persons to be restored to their former sinless state:

> Several of these being thoroughly sensible of their fall, and deeply ashamed before God, have been again filled with love. . . they have received the blessing they had before, with abundant increase.[1]

At this point we may attempt some evaluation. Throughout the history of the teaching on Christian perfection but especially in John Wesley we encounter the decisive objection to the conception of absolute perfection. Wesley for instance declared: "Absolute or infallible perfection I never [italics mine] contend for."[2] Many students are relieved when they come to this note; but to use it in order to lessen his teaching on perfect attainment is to deny his main emphasis. Wesley taught the possibility of such attainment until his death.

Interestingly enough, however, this doctrine -- if it is sincere -- is never united with the doctrine of perseverance.[3] Conversely, strict Calvinism is strongly opposed to any mingling with perfectionism. The latter view has largely prevailed against the former throughout history; but the need is great for each Christian to realize both doctrines in his

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[1] Wood, op. cit., p. 115.

[2] Flew, op. cit., p. 325; Wesley, op. cit., VI, 3-5. In these pages the author discusses what perfection does not mean. He summarizes that it "does not imply (as some men seemed to have imagined) an exemption either from ignorance, or mistake, or infirmities, or temptations" (p. 5).

[3] Growth beyond sanctification is necessary; one may fall from this grace keeping the alternative of either gaining it again or never to regain it.

life.[1] This may not be done without some qualifications of either teaching.

We must ask Wesley, for instance, how it is possible for sin to spring up again if its roots have been destroyed in an act of God. We would have to inquire what his distinction between sin and mistake means and explain why and on what grounds this is necessary in contrast to the Augustinian tradition which calls both sin. It would be necessary to investigate why the sanctified are often plagued with doubt about their state of perfection and, therefore, need to be encouraged to believe. Perhaps, some could testify to a glorious sinless state after they had secretly committed grievous moral sins.[2]

This was the kind of attacks his contemporaries launched upon Wesley. These were grievous misunderstandings of what he meant by perfection which caused him to exclaim:

> Shall we go on in asserting perfection against all the world? Or shall we quietly let it drop? We really must do one or the other; and, I apprehend, the sooner the better.[3]

To understand his doctrine of perfection it is necessary to accept his view of sin. This is a simple matter and can be defined with a few words. Wesley says it is "a voluntary transgression of a known law."[4] Only what was consciously an offense against God could be called sin. There was no unconscious sin. In my estimate this was a rather needed emphasis. Sin was not merely a thing that was handed on from generation to generation. Those who had contended that

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[1] Perhaps in the same manner as he can sense love in judgment.

[2] cf. Sangster, Path to Perfection . . ., pp. 124-30.

[3] Ibid., p. 78. [4] Ibid., p. 71.

it was original in the sense of being permanently present in all men frequently found excuses for their sinful acts. With the new ethical emphasis of Wesley this idea of sin was curbed. Sins do have an aspect of relativity, they are relative to environment and culture. This is expressed in the parable of the talents where we are not left with the impression that the man with the smallest talent was expected to produce as great an interest as the one who had received the largest number of talents. The fact which Wesley emphasized was that each man was able -- if he only willed -- to produce the certain requirement. Law that could not be fulfilled could not be law. Perfection that could only be attained beyond death had nothing to do with this life, the here and now, but had to be dismissed until its time came. But perfection which was the result of the conquest of outward, consciously willed acts of sin had to imply a conquest of sinfulness.

The implications of this doctrine may be demonstrated by two geometrical figures, the circle and the polygon. The extent of the surface of a circle can only be determined by a crucial trick; we must <u>imagine</u> the circle to be a polygon with an infinite number of sides. Connecting all corners with their common center we would receive an infinite number of triangles arranged in a starlike shape. By determining the extent of the surface of these separate triangles we will arrive at a formula which will then, by inserting the radius of a circle, give us the extent of the surface of the circle.

In our analogy the circle represents sin or sinfulness, the sides of the polygon represent the outward, recognizable acts of sin. Four inferences can be drawn. First, we may call the bent to sinning sinfulness, but this is an ambiguous principle which has no meaning unless it is broken up into small, tangible sections. Secondly, only the conscious handling and measuring of the outward acts of sin (the individual triangles) can give us the extent of sinfulness. Thirdly, each man's sinfulness would differ from another depending on his own realization of his acts of sin (i.e., each circle could be broken down into a polygon with a vastly different number of sides). Fourthly, the absence of wilful acts of sin destroys the proof for an existing sinfulness.[1]

With this observation we may leave Wesley and after a brief look at a modern holiness movement turn to a biblical investigation of the subject. In the concluding summaries we shall have an opportunity to evaluate his conviction further.

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[1]This argument cannot strictly be used to disprove one or the other; both may be real and known in a different way. If, however, we agree with Wesley's premise that "sin is a willful transgression of a known law" this is helpful to demonstrate its relations to original sin. The fourth inference must, then, always be the result.

The Church of God Movement

In the year 1880 a small movement began in the Mid-western states of the U. S. the headquarters of which finally was fixed at Anderson, Indiana. Standing with its congregational polity somewhere between Baptist and Methodist teachings its strong missionary emphasis has gained it a following in many foreign countries increasing its number of communicants to nearly 300,000 in the past year.[1] I became a member of this movement in Germany and belong to it today.

Turning aside from the immediate purpose of this thesis I would like to observe that the Wesleyan doctrine of holiness and sanctification has been largely accepted by the Church of God which is only one among a number of small movements emphasizing holiness. However, the Wesleyan doctrine has been qualified at some points, and it is this which I would like to point out.

Recognizing our indebtedness to John Wesley, A. F. Gray says:

> Principal credit for the revival of this doctrine and experience goes to John Wesley and his associates. Wesley is generally regarded the father of the modern holiness movement, his theology being regarded as standard by most holiness preachers.[2]

Believing that Paul referred to a second experience

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[1] R. Eugene Sterner (ed.), Yearbook of the Church of God (Indiana: Executive Council of the Church of God, 1958), p. 155.

[2] Albert F. Gray, Studies in Christian Theology (Anderson: Gospel Trumpet Company, 1957), p. 24.

of Christians when he wrote "let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of flesh"[1] he continues:

> In doing this we make use of the means provided . . . not as by magic, but by earnest effort on our part. The goal to be reached is more than a slight improvement . . . Holiness is not a "once-for-all" experience that needs no attention having once been received.[2]

Or again:

> Holiness does not pertain to church office or official position but to character: and as such it is a personal quality . . . The result is not the destruction of human nature nor the bringing of it to a uniform pattern, but a purification and strengthening of good qualities [italics mine]. Some people restrict the term to a particular second experience or the state resulting therefrom. In the Scriptures the word is not restricted to this meaning, but may mean sinlessness in different aspects. . . . Thus, holiness, or sanctification, may be thought of in three aspects: a change of heart and a deliverance from sinning obtained in regeneration; the purification of one's nature accomplished in connection with the baptism of the Spirit; and the further improvement of one's disposition and conduct through continual effort and the assistance of the grace of God.[3]
>
> Signs are not inseparably connected with the experience, and so their presence is not to be sought after and their absence is no disproof of the experience. However, certain results invariably follow.[4]

In another volume we read:

> Sanctification is consecration and dedication. It is quite clear from Old Testament usage that sanctified things were dedicated to God for his exclusive use. . . . In Christian usage sanctification usually refers to a moral cleansing.[5]
>
> In sanctification the disease is cured. But as a well person is susceptible to disease, so a sanctified

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[1] II Cor. 7:1.

[2] Gray, op. cit., p. 25.

[3] Ibid., p. 26.

[4] Ibid., p. 27.

[5] Albert F. Gray, Christian Theology (Indiana: The Warner Press, 1946), vol. II, pp. 83f.

> person may be tempted and may sin. Sanctification does not remove the possibility of sinning.[1]

It may also be of interest that the giving of special, divine gifts[2] is related to this act of dedication. When the human effort of complete consecration has been made God recognizes the commitment by an act of approval or sanctification. He may give commission and strength to a special task. "It is more than an immediate act; it is a constant state of the soul."[3]

On another page we may find statements like these:

> Holiness consists of more than the baptism with the Holy Spirit; it has its beginning in conversion. . . There is a complete abandonment of one's own will and ways, that God's will may be supreme. . . . The conditions for receiving the baptism of the Spirit are not clearly formulated in the Scriptures. Faith, as always, is the primary condition.
> . . . . . .
> With many people the baptism is something to be professed rather than experienced. An effort has been made to consecrate and believe, with little apparent result.[4]

Each new emphasis or major concern is sure to be controversial, if for no other reason than for neglecting other cardinal truths of equal importance. Wesley had attempted to counteract a rationalistic view of original sin which overlooked the need for a continuous devotion to God. The above excerpts show that the teaching is not without controversy today. The predominant danger is that it be identified with an absolute attainment which needs no further attention. In Gray's wrestling with this problem the real meaning of the

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[1] Ibid., p. 87.

[2] Such as listed in I Cor. 12 and Romans 12.

[3] Ibid., p. 88.

[4] Gray, Studies in Christian Theology, p. 28.

event seems to be brought out more fully: it refers to an encounter of a man who already knows the forgiving love and grace of God but who at the time of the forgiveness of his sins has not been able to concentrate on the commission and task that he must subsequently fulfill. He, thus, returns to his Father -- so to speak -- like a boy who had run off overjoyed about the great gift he had received (i.e. forgiveness) and prays upon his return: I had forgotten to ask thee what I must do; I wish to learn your will more fully.

That this is an additional development and augmentation of Wesley's doctrine I would like to demonstrate by three practical and common emphases of our movement which I miss in Wesley. Unfortunately, I find these not in any written form; but they are so commonly taught and believed that they need to be written down here.

First, it is never denied that this experience may be received at the time of conversion. Those who bear the evidences of what is believed to be a devoted life but do not claim to have realized a special event are generally thought to have experienced it in this manner.[1] Those who have fallen from this grace but at some point later return are believed always to return to this full state of love and service; for -- it is said -- "they already knew the full will and requirement of God once."

Secondly, recent converts are urged to press on to

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[1] Of course there remains the possibility that they had subsequently adventured it without full knowledge of its occurrence.

this second experience at once with intended care and attention. Rich instruction is always at hand to explain its urgency and need. There is no reluctance to suggest a period of time during which a Christian may possibly make such a needed consecration. It is suggested at three months;[1] but no decided limits are set and much room is left for personal differences of temperament and character. If a converted Christian joins the movement there is no special insistence that he must strive for the experience; it is left to his own judgment to see if he possesses what others have. But it must be emphasized again that postponement is in contradiction to the essential character of sanctification. Rather it is the desire of each child of God to surrender his life fully and to receive God's commission. It must also be said that this second road is considered more natural than the first.

Thirdly, and perhaps most important of all we speak of the need of repeated "infillings" of the Spirit subsequent to sanctification. All consecrated Christians stand in need of this.[2] As far as I am aware there has been no attempt to suggest any time periods in this connection. This encounter is believed to be of the same nature as the initial act of

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[1] It was Wesley's observation that sanctification was frequently reached before death, in other cases often ten and twenty years after conversion. (cf. Perkins, op. cit., p. 319)

[2] It is evident that this is quite in keeping with the whole of Christian tradition.

sanctification[1] differing only in that they are secondary to the first. That this is frequently taken advantage of can be seen especially in those churches which have an altar of consecration in front of the pulpit; here not too seldom older members may be found kneeling at the close of a service. This also may be related to special prayers for embarking missionaries or other agents of the church for which intercessory petition is made for a special infilling or enduement with strength.

Considering that such "infillings" are indeed one form of growth, and knowing that all of Christianity is intent on this, one may ask: "Why the importance of the initial sanctification?" A part of the answer may lie in the beginning of this summary,[2] a second part, perhaps, in psychology which affirms that each new experience becomes of consequence only if it is set off from other experiences.

It is now becoming necessary to turn to our biblical survey of the question.

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[1] with less emphasis upon a purging activity of God.

[2] cf. p. 57.

CHAPTER III

BIBLICAL POSITIONS

We have seen that the teaching of perfection cannot be dismissed by ascribing its origin to pagan or philosophical tradition. In chapter I we observed that the terminology has strong roots in the New Testament which in turn found some of its footing in old Testament ideas. This justified the church in employing the same vocabulary subsequently.

The question now arises: is the church today justified in using this term which is so susceptible of misunderstanding? Is it necessary that resurgent fundamentalism with its emphasis upon biblical terminology shall insist upon the use of this term?

In my search for a valid position for today I would next like to investigate the New Testament ideas of sinlessness.

Jesus' Teachings

All questions concerning Christian Perfection must by virtue of the very name look back to Christ. If there had been no Christ we might speak of other kinds of attainment but never of Christian achievement. It is, therefore, altogether fair to look at the person of Jesus before we listen to his teachings.

The Gospel according to Mark opens with a dramatic sweep. In the very beginning we read already of a man with an unclean spirit who called Jesus "the Holy One of God."[1] Preceding this, Jesus had been baptized by John at which event God had expressed his approval toward his son. Matthew reports that upon John's objection to baptizing Jesus, the latter had insisted that he must fulfill all righteousness.[2] After the event Jesus was "driven" into the wilderness where he was tempted.[3] When he returned he chose some of his disciples and began to teach and to preach.

The question now arises, what did this man Jesus whom the disciples called the Christ say about his own state before God? Did he claim to have attained perfection and if so, of what did it consist? His insistence before John the Baptist -- that he fulfill all righteousness -- may lead us to the consideration of this question.

With his temptations in the wilderness a decisive note of obedience to the Father is introduced which characterizes his entire life. In these experiences he insisted: "Man shall . . . live by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God,"[4] "you shall not tempt the Lord your God,"[5] and "you shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only shall you serve."[6] Upon his return he began his ministry in

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[1] Mk. 1:24.
[2] Mt. 3:15.
[3] Mk. 1:12.
[4] Mt. 4:4.
[5] Mt. 4:7.
[6] Lk. 4:8.

Galilee. No doubt this is the true introductory discourse to his work as redeemer.[1] His response to God's call in his mature years was very necessary should he become the Savior. With this response came his decision to be completely obedient to God and the identification of his purpose with the purpose of God.[2] His obedience may be called complete when his earthly life is investigated, but it will not be completed until "it includes all that rule and authority and power which He has won over to Himself by the spirit of love."[3] Nevertheless, obedience like other characteristics of his personality are not the result of an end that he sought after but rather a quality of his character at all times. In fact his perfection in obedience may be found in its very continued presence with him. Secondly, it is quite impossible for any man to estimate the present and future submission of Christ to God. Since his end is premeditated by his beginning we may be quite content to scrutinize his earthly ministry.

The summary of his earthly obedience is found in his journey to Jerusalem and his crucifixion. Jesus did not merely intend to evangelize this city of Judah when he had set his face toward it; neither did he go there in a boisterous and heroic spirit to seek his execution. He knew

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[1] In contrast to the stories of his divine conception.

[2] Three examples may suffice: "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work" (Jn. 4:34). "For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me"(Jn. 6:38). "He who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him"(Jn. 8:29). RSV.

[3] Perkins, op. cit., p. 69. cf. I Cor. 15:24-28.

that martyrdom awaited him and he strove earnestly to avoid it. But his general practice of obedience aided him to face the severest issue of his life in the garden of Gethsemane.[1] He did not dodge the test rationalizing that he would do God's will at another time in another way. In the end it was not his obedience which gave him strength but the knowledge of God's purpose. In this experience of Christ is set forth the realm of all human perfection: such human virtues as will lead man into the presence of God and urge him to do His will. A second characteristic of such virtue is, that they will keep man doing what he knows to be the will of God at that very point. Thus, Jesus did not recant even when he felt forsaken by God.

Christian effort is, therefore, always blessed by God. Its very purpose is union with God. When this union is reached man can be carried far beyond his own virtues, and in that respect human achievement is far surpassed by God's grace.

But since God does not always speak to man when he longs to hear him we are concerned about the state of perfection which man can achieve in such a situation. With Christ we must learn to endure the cross wherever we meet it in our lives. His obedience must become our obedience in new vistas of service.

A second expression of perfection in the life of Jesus we have perceived already in his feeling of identity with the Father. This unity was so complete that Jesus could

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[1] Ibid., 67.

say categorically: I and the Father are one. His unity with God was so strong and conscious that he knew he could go only to him should he be crucified.[1] He was in the Father but the Father was also in him.[2] In no other Hebrew prophet do we find such an intense God-consciousness as in Jesus. It was he who spoke of personal communion with the Spirit of God, it was he who introduced the dispensation of the Spirit. Indeed "the Spirit Himself was been transformed through the humanity of Jesus."[3]

There is a tendency in our time to stress the requirements which are necessary to such a union with God. DeWolf being concerned that his Christology might cause Christians to become weary of following Christ says: "until we learn to follow more steadfastly we need not complain of not being 'the pioneer.'"[4] This does in a way defeat one purpose of his theology -- which is, to encourage followers of Christ to carry on the Gospel beyond the work that Jesus did. This cannot be done by mere following. Likewise, the insistence upon fulfillment of certain requirements preceding union with God is an attempt to guard the Christian faith from ecstaticism. However, we must not forget that Jesus had a clear understanding that he, and no other, was chosen to be the Saviour of mankind. We do too frequently overlook that Christ insisted that the Father spoke through him; and in turn we have discouraged committed Christians from feeling too self-assured

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[1]Jn. 13:1. [2]Jn. 14:11.

[3]Perkins, op. cit., p. 73.

[4]L. Harold DeWolf, A Theology of the Living Church (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1953), p. 254.

in their union with God. This becomes more important when we consider that all Christians possess a different understanding of God. If the Gospel has any social concern at all it is necessary that the religious man remember that as long as he evangelizes he battles with powers he has to meet on their own ground. Union with God always brings with it a clear sense of mission; this mission cannot be discharged effectively without a sense of self-assurance which becomes another mark of perfection.

Through love and obedience Jesus communed with God and emerged with a dynamic power to speak the will of God. Out of this highly individual relationship resulted a strong social concern. To love God always meant to serve his neighbor. For this again we have many examples. One specific action of Christ which was intended to illustrate a universal attitude of service may suffice. This is the washing of the disciple's feet at the last Passover. The disciples had admired the authority and power with which their master had preached the word of God. Some day, they anticipated, they would do likewise.[1] There had been quarrels about their precedence in an expected earthly kingdom.[2] Even now as they walked across the fields toward Jerusalem they bickered about their importance. Jesus was grieved. He still had to teach them the most essential lesson of all or else they might never understand the spirit

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[1]At times they had aspired to be great heroes, as for instance on that occasion when they asked: "Lord, do you want us to bid fire come down from heaven and consume them?" (Lk. 9:54).

[2]Mk. 10:35-39.

of God. When the disciples "had trooped into the upper room like a set of sulky schoolboys"[1] the opportunity had come for Jesus. He girded himself with a towel and began to wash the disciples feet. When he came to Peter he objected: "You shall never wash my feet!"[2] No doubt this had been the objection of all men there; but they were so puzzled that they dared not speak. Jesus' concluding words were of paralyzing quality: "you call me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet."[3] The disciples were indeed far from this idea of unselfish and humble service. To them, leadership meant privilege not responsibility; Jesus knew that he was teacher and Lord, but this status obligated him to be the servant of men. He who had wrestled with sin in himself and had conquered became the servant of vilest sinners.

Jesus has shown us the greatest example of complete obedience and love to God, intimate union with God, and continuous service to men. The church has always claimed that he is the perfect revelation of God. This last claim is more crucial than those mentioned above. The author of Hebrews observes: "He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature."[4]

As Perkins has observed the insistence on Jesus' eternal sonship was the sincere attempt to save Christ from

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[1]The Interpreter's Bible, edited by G. Arthur Buttrick et. al. (New York: Abingdon Press, 1952), VIII, 640 (exposition).

[2]Jn. 13:8.

[3]Jn. 13:13-14.

[4]Heb. 1:3.

contaminations that were felt to creep into him through his human nature.[1] It was at this point where the idea of imputed righteousness arose. The fact of Christ's birth was at first believed to immortalize man in salvation. Irenaeus of Lyon feared that the necessity of man's act in this view of salvation would be lost altogether and insisted that no salvation could come about without human merit. What Irenaeus wished to avoid, Luther achieved.

> The new redeemed life (vivicatio et justificatio) was made to consist in being redeemed without merit, in the non-imputation of sin, and in the imputation of righteousness. . . . His bold and confident disposition led him to regard perfection as consisting in the full assurance of the imputation of the righteousness of Christ.[2]

This concept of imputed righteousness has no doubt brought much misunderstanding concerning the Christian faith. It was a potent leftover of the Anselmic substitutionary theory of salvation; but it did not agree with Jesus' source of certainty of faith. Luther relied upon an abstract ideal for his assurance of salvation, Jesus upon the reality of his personal communion with God. Christian attainment must, consequently, be of radically different meaning to both.

In examining the perfect revelation of God in Christ we must free ourselves from this mistake of the early church. The fact that Christ was severely tempted to sin means always that he was fully man. Needless to say he could have yielded to the temptations. We are advised that he rejected anything that would deny God's rule, which in turn made him acceptable to God. Whether his life and actions were entirely flawless

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[1] Perkins, op. cit., p. 63. [2] Ibid., p. 67.

beyond this point becomes at least secondary if not irrelevant.[1] Indeed almost all works on the person of Christ consider certain accusations and impeachments against him.[2]

Christ revealed God to men in so far as it is possible for man to demonstrate God.[3] Since he was a messenger sent to men this is what mattered. He perfectly disclosed God. There was nothing lacking in this display of the Father. It is rather widely accepted today that man can only think of God in anthropomorphic terms; an anthropomorphic revelation of God is, therefore, his highest expression.[4]

At this point is might be well to examine a characteristic statement of an "otherness" theologian concerning the nature and state of man who receives this revelation of God in Christ.

> Man cannot escape his humanity, and humanity means limitation, finitude, creaturehood, separation from God. And if he is not conscious of it, if he cannot tell us about it, and if his fellow men who want to help him cannot understand it, the more serious his plight.[5]

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[1] Carl Ullmann, The Sinlessness of Jesus: An Evidence for Christianity, translated by Sophia Taylor (Seventh revised edition; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1870), pp. 81-106 defends fervently the complete sinlessness of Jesus.

[2] Cf. Perkins, loc. cit.

[3] A revelation of God beyond man's capacity to comprehend it in any way is a contradiction. Such revelation could not exist for man; it would be known only to God.

[4] Hugh V. White, Lecture: "Introduction To The Philosophy of Religion," 1958.

[5] Karl Barth, The Word of God and the Word of Man; translated by Douglas Horton (U. S. A.: The Pilgrim Press, 1928), pp. 189f.

We see readily enough that any teaching on Christian achievement in this context would be fatal and disastrous. But the present writer is not in agreement with this passage. Man is indeed in a state of creaturehood, man is indeed human; but humanity does not mean limitation. It takes on the meaning of limitation when man aspires to be like God, and only then. If man acknowledges his creator in submissive "obedience -- in -- trust" he will joyfully accept his creaturehood and not look upon God as a cruel taskmaster who requires more than man can fulfill in creaturehood.[1,2] In contrast to Barth I contend that with a consciousness of creaturehood comes man's salvation a part of which is willing acceptance of humanity -- not so much as limitation as opportunity in showing forth God. Man's task lies in the here and now; he must not speculate about an unknown perfection he may expect in the afterlife. That perfection is a gift the Father will give to those he loves at the time that He will choose. This was the view of the man Jesus who became the Christ.

It is sometimes contended that Jesus' understanding of the kingdom of God is eschatological and that the achievement of the members of this kingdom would consequently lie in the future world. Some observations need be made here. First, it is necessary to note that Lk. 17:21b may be translated variably by "the kingdom of God is among you" as well

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[1] Cf. Mt. 25:25-28; Rom. 9:21.

[2] It seems as if this is the sin into which for instance Lutheranism is so liable to fall; due to its supernatural and individual view of salvation it is neglectful of the need for social salvation.

as "the kingdom of God is within you."[1] Although the former is unusual when compared with other references to the kingdom in the Synoptics it should not be ruled out on that account. It is quite possible that Jesus stated the fact of its existence.[2] It need not be in the future, but may find its manifestation in his generation already.

The passage also leads us to the second point. The rule of God is not only realized in individual union with God but also in society. This had become apparent in his service to men;[3] we are not justified in saying that he had no social concern. Love has no meaning apart from society, it can only be applied here.

What would happen if all men should live with and in God after the example of Christ? We are often too pessimistic to promote such ideal. But it is again quite probable that this was the hope Jesus cherished. It is the arrival of the new covenant visualized by Isaiah and Jeremiah, it is the new creation, the people of God, yes, indeed, the return of Christ. Newness of earth and heaven come about by the change of heart and recognition of God's rule; this must begin with the individual but it will be fully realized when all men have found their creator.[4] The kingdom is present in those who find it; it is coming gradually through the catastrophic experiences of men.[5]

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[1] Int. Bible, VIII, 500. [2] Ibid.

[3] cf. pp. 65f. [4] Flew, op. cit., p. 40.

[5] Although Dr. G. Harkness would not contend that Jesus cherished such hopeful ideals, she does support this

The Apostle Paul

With Paul we have arrived at a realistic and practical soteriology. He is "more concerned to proclaim the fact of the salvation in Christ than to formulate an adequate doctrine or explanation of it."[1]

The locus classicus in the eighth chapter of Romans may be superscribed: the vitality of the Spirit. In this section we find Paul's discussion of the Christian attainment possible in this world. The question of sinlessness is considered briefly. Paul "nowhere admits that sin must persist in the life of the believer."[2] But, to conclude from this, that sin is completely absent would mean to put words into the mouth of the apostle. On the contrary, Paul's emphasis upon salvation through faith alone must have caused some opponents -- who taught salvation through merit -- to conclude that Paul taught that the man in Christ would continue to sin.[3] He asks repeatedly the question: "Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?"[4] When pressed to answer it Paul emphatically denies it: "God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?"[5] Inspite of this categorical answer, Paul was hesitant to affirm a quantitative

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position somewhat when she observes that Jesus "had a realistic knowledge both of human sin and of the possibilities of the redeemed life" Christian Ethics (New York: Abingdon Press, 1957), p. 55.

[1] Int. Bible, IX, 568.

[2] Flew, op. cit., p. 60.

[3] Int. Bible, IX, 470f. (exeg.).

[4] Rom. 6:1.

[5] Rom. 6:2.

freedom from sins. He concludes the contentious question in v. 14: "For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace." Here, freedom from the dominion of sin lies in the future. Those who are -- in the present -- under grace are free from the dominion or "habit" of sin (8:2b).

Those who are in Christ do not walk after the flesh but after the Spirit.[1] This life of the Spirit stands in diametric opposition to the life under the law. "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty." There is no law of the Spirit.[2,3] Therefore, there is also freedom from sin; the former bondage is broken by the entry of the Spirit. As Jesus had affirmed that the kingdom was already present so Paul asserts that "the possession of the Spirit" is "the sure sign that the new age was already beginning."[4] Deliverance from the power of sin and death is, therefore, beginning in the present life of the believer.[5]

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[1]Rom. 8:1. [2]Flew, Ibid., p. 61

[3]When Paul speaks of the "law of the Spirit" in 8:2. Law means not commandment but rather "principle," "pattern," "rule" (Int. Bible, IX, 506; exeg.).

[4]Ibid., 505 (exeg.).

[5]There is little doubt that Paul expected a glorious return of Christ within his lifetime. This return would bring a consummation of the present world -- for which even all nature groaned and travailed (Rom. 8:22) -- and the full adoption of the sons of God through a final act of redemption (8:23). This eschatological soteriology was not disturbed by Paul's subsequent revision of his earlier expectations (cf. II Thess.). When he was imprisoned later and desired to depart from this life to be with Christ (Phil. 1:23) he needed not revise his hope for a near consummation.

After Paul had fervently denied the adequacy of the Old Testament law, antinomianism was sure to arise. Consequently, he saw himself forced to return to some kind of ethical requirement for the Christian. In his later epistles he began to speak of the "fruits" of the Spirit or of righteousness.[1] He also contended that the penetrating, inward power of the Spirit enabled man to fulfill the law, not, indeed, in its ceremonial minuteness but in the spirit of brotherly love.[2]

These fruits were a natural result so that their absence became an indication that love through the Spirit was not present. This was the social test of love. The individual was always certain if he possessed the Spirit or not, for if he was justified by faith he communed with Christ. Christ was in him and he in Christ. Both became one, yet never identical. The character of the Spirit was transcendence, the character of man was agency.[3]

> The Spirit also brings powerful reinforcement to our own "spirit" so that we are able to triumph over the sinful desires of the flesh and to know something of the original order and peace of God's creation. . . the "fruit of the Spirit" is not the achievement of moral effort, but the inevitable expression of the new spiritual life.[4]

With Christ, Paul believes that society can be changed through God's rule of love in man. Knowing that there is no

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[1] cf. II Cor. 9:10; Phil. 1:11; Gal. 5:22.

[2] Gal. 5:14. cf. Flew, op. cit., p. 62.

[3] Ibid. There is no deification of man.

[4] Int. Bible, IX, 371.

one way to a perfect society we ought not condemn this individualistic idealism. Relativism and absolutism must be mingled in the effective life, and Christian love was the absolute of Paul's Gospel. It has an effect upon society by way of the individual. Most of its characteristics are social,[1] and it was no mere coincidence that the apostle developed his discourse on love, writing to the contentious, quarrelsome church at Corinth. To the Colossians he wrote similarly:

> And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.[2]

If the Christian community found it difficult to live in a unity of faith the apostle admonished them to "keep the unity of the Spirit"[3] of love.

The requirement for perfection comes from God's will. The transformed life of the Christian must be a proof of "what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God."[4] For this task a separation from pagan unbelievers is necessary:

> Let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, and make holiness perfect (complete) in the fear of God.[5]

Paul includes himself among those who must "cleanse" themselves from "every defilement." It is a plea for entire recantation of evil. But this alone is not sufficient. Indeed no one can cleanse himself unless he finds a substitute for his former dedication to sin. The request to

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[1] I Cor. 13:4-7.

[2] Col. 3:14.

[3] Eph. 4:3.

[4] Rom. 12:2.

[5] II Cor. 7:1.

"be separate"[1] gives us the key to Paul's meaning of holiness. To be perfect in holiness means to be single-heartedly separated to or set apart for the service of God.[2] There is no room for compromise. The demand is for unreserved commitment.[3]

If we have noticed that Paul needed to be cleansed repeatedly while serving God[4] we must not overlook that in other places he claimed to be unblamable and holy:

> You are witnesses, and God also, how holy and righteous and blameless was our behavior to you believers.[5]

There is no doubt that he is, here, referring to the moral and ethical conduct of himself and his fellow workers. This impeccability has reference to time and place; -- namely their evangelistic stay at Thessalonica -- he is not speaking of an imputed righteousness as he does at other places. Perkins, Flew, and P. T. Forsyth must be criticised at this point; for they overlook Paul's concern for the moral manifestations of the spiritual life of love. His cautious outlook for

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[1] II Cor. 6:17.

[2] According to John H. Otwell, Lecture: "Introduction to Literature and Interpretation of the Old Testament," 1958; this is the meaning in which Isaiah uses the word. II Cor. 6:17 is a quotation from Isaiah 52:11.

[3] It need not be stressed that man's "full dedication" is urged by the "promises" God has made (Int. Bible, X, 355, [exeg.]).

[4] As is also emphatically expressed in I Cor. 15:31: "I die daily." cf. Gal. 2:20; Rom. 8:36.

[5] I Th. 2:10. cf. also Eph. 4:1; Phil. 1:27; Tit. 1:8.

Christian ethical traits is social.

It is significant that he seldom speaks of perfection as such.[1] Rather, he speaks of perfection as seperate constraints or virtues such as "perfect understanding,"[2] perfect [human] weakness,"[3] "perfect holiness,"[4] "perfect confidence,"[5] "perfect harmony,"[6] "perfect patience,"[7] "perfect courtesy."[8]

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[1]The exceptions are found in: (1) I Cor. 2:6 -- "We speak wisdom among them that are perfect (RSV, "mature") . . ." (2) II Cor. 13:11 -- "Be perfect (RSV, "mend your ways," is unhappy, for it implies more than this; "it urges steady positive advance to perfect living," Int. Bible, , 423), be of good comfort, be of one mind, live in peace. . ." (3) Eph. 4:13 -- "Till we all come . . . unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ." Th. O. Wedel observes that although the conjunction has a "final force" it also insists "that time is needed for the attainment of the end," Int. Bible, X, 693. (4) Phil. 3:15 & 17 --"Let us therefore, as many as be perfect (RSV, "mature"), be thus minded . . . be followers together of me (RSV, "join in imitating me") and mark them which walk so as ye have us for an example." E. F. Scott comments on this passage that the character of Christian perfection is "to be always striving toward something better," Int. Bible. XI, 92 (exeg.). Paul is not hesitant to encourage his converts to copy his outward behavior in order that they may set themselves off from those who live immorally. (5) Col. 1:28 -- "We preach Christ, warning every man, and teaching every man in all wisdom; that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus." In all likelihood Paul labored hard to bring each convert to some kind of attainment and was not content until he felt that they had reached such a place. (6) II Tim. 3:17 -- "That the man of God may be perfect (RSV, "complete"), thoroughly furnished unto all good works." (7) II Cor. 13:9 -- " . . . this also we wish, even your perfection (RSV, "improvement, is not strong enough to translate. . . this attainment of religious and moral perfection," Int. Bible, X, 421.)."

[2]I Cor. 14:20.

[3]II Cor. 12:9.

[4]II Cor. 7:1 (RSV).

[5]II Cor. 7:16 (RSV).

[6]Col. 3:14 (RSV).

[7]I Ti. 1:16 (RSV).

[8]Tit. 3:2 (RSV).

When all of this is said and we search for Paul's meaning of perfection we must say that it is found neither in moral conduct and virtuous character nor in imputed righteousness.[1] Unquestionably, the apostle had no use for the external Jewish law which could only bring knowledge of sin but not deliverance from it. Since Paul's problem consisted in his awareness of his past, present, and future sins, the law could only add to his agony and despair. It was God in Christ who in a sacrifical manner justified him; the death of Jesus freed him from future condemnation while his resurrection brought the new life for the present. But Paul saw that not all men had found security in Christ and were in fact still serving sin without knowing it. To these a system of morality or virtues could bring the realization of sin needed for their justification. Secondly, he was pressed by his converts to outline some system of Christian virtues in order that they might better understand in what they distinguished themselves from their pagan relatives. Thirdly, a preliminary moral system was needed as defence against libertines. We may agree, then that these rules of conduct were the result of the social demand upon Paul's gospel; they were not his idea of perfection. But neither was man complete merely because of God's imputed righteousness. This completion found its fulfillment in the life beyond the grave.

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[1]The apostle was not sure how far his achievement before the Jewish law reached. In one place he affirms that he was blameless before the law (Phil. 3:6) while in another place he confesses that he could not always do the good which he desired to do (Rom. 7:21). cf. Sangster, The Pure in Heart, p. 32.

Christian perfection found its expression in the New Life. It was entered through man's resurrection with Christ and God's forgiveness. Although it was primarily a gift of God's grace and although it was representative of the final destiny of man it was concerned with the life here and now. The new life stood in vital opposition to sin and evil, it was the light in contrast to darkness, it was the realm in which the dominion of sin was broken on this earth. P. T. Forsyth may aid us in the final analysis of Paul. He says:

> It is not a perfection of proportion, of harmony, of symmetry. That is the Greek, pagan idea of perfection. . . . The pagan idea of perfection is balance, or harmony of parts with each other. It is self-contained and self-poised. The Christian idea is faith, or harmony of relations with the will and grace of God. It is self-devoted, complete in Him; the perfection not of finish but of faith.[1]

We do not <u>possess</u> it as a part of our integrity, we do not <u>receive</u> it as a distinct parcel, we do not <u>contain</u> it, we do not <u>believe</u> it. Much rather man is <u>redeemed</u> into it, he realizes, tastes, and lives it, he feels its permeating power:

> It is something we can and must enter on in this life. We cannot exhaust it in this or any life. "Be ye perfect" does not mean, Aim at a perfection in eternity, many lives and cycles away: the idea of cycles of development, however true, is foreign to the New Testament. It means, Enter here and now on the perfection of God.[2]

God gave his all when he revealed himself in Christ; there is nothing that he does today which he does not do through Christ. We are urged by Paul to enter into this complete justification

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[1] Peter Taylor Forsyth, Christian Perfection (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1899), p. 52.

[2] Ibid., p. 54.

which leads to full redemption. Those who continually strive after but never expect to experience it are cheated of its joy. Those who do experience it do inevitably externalize it in daily action and behavior; but this is secondary,[1] it adds nothing to the initial perfection which we received in Christ through faith.

> Perfection is wholeness. In our perfection there is a permanent element of repentance. The final symphony of praise has a deep bass of penitence. God may forgive us, but we do not forgive ourselves . . . . Repentance belongs to our abiding in Christ and so to any true holiness.[2]

Paul never speaks of sinlessness; but he always declares that the Christian is free from the dominion of sin and death and is opposed to all sin. The real question is not: how many times does the Christian commit the sins of omission and weakness? but rather: what is his true concern and affinity, what is his attitude toward sin, under which King has he striven, served, and died?[3]

The Johannine Writings

We accept the common authorship of the Gospel according to John and of the epistles that bear the same name. With these writings we have arrived at those letters of the New Testament that unquestionably teach a sinless perfection.[4]

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[1] However, not unnecessary. It is a natural, unavoidable result.

[2] Forsyth, op. cit., pp. 36f.

[3] Ibid., p. 35.

[4] Johannine perfectionist theology is largely reminiscent of Pauline theology except for this distinction.

The writer of the epistles is concerned with the rivalry between the world and the church. He contrasts the ethical life of the two and suggests tests and criteria for Christian behavior.[1]

The Christian distinguishes himself from the world in that he has fellowship with the "true God." God in return reveals to man the eternal life which man begins to live already in this world:

> Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that believeth on me hath everlasting life.[2]

Or again:

> He who hears my word and believes him who sent me, has eternal life; he does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.[3]

Life and eternal life are equivalent; they are one and the same. Flew has pointed out that the author accepted the common view of the eschatology of his day but did not look forward to it with any special anticipation. Neither did he emphasize its nearness. What which mattered was that men could lay hold on eternal life and begin to live beyond the ordinary ways of this life. The everlasting life is a continuum which is not interrupted or changed by an eschatological event. There is no break between the present and the future.[4]

This makes the Johannine author perfectionist. Eschatology is frequently used to stress the need for present

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[1] Int. Bible, XII, 214.

[2] Jn. 6:47.

[3] Jn. 5:24; cf. I Jn. 5:13.

[4] Flew, op. cit., pp. 96f.

perfection.[1] John's recollection of the raising of Lazarus is significant. Upon Jesus' promise that her brother would rise again, Martha said: "I know he will rise at the resurrection on the last day." But Jesus emphasized: "I am the resurrection and the life."[2] There can be no dispute, the author has almost no room for failure and shortcomings. He becomes more explicit as he advances:

> No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him.[3]

... if he wanted to make doubly sure he continues in the next verse:

> Let no one deceive you. He who does right is righteous, as he [i.e. God] is righteous.

Righteousness is not simply imputed but seems to depend upon right conduct.[4] One root of Wesley's later teaching is found in another verse:

> No one born of God commits sin; for God's nature abides in him, and he cannot sin because he is born of God.[5]

Once more, he intends to leave no misconceptions. He makes the point clear in the lines that follow:

> By this it may be seen who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil; whoever does not do right is not of God, nor he who does not love his brother.[6]

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[1] Ibid.

[2] Jn. 11:24 & 25.

[3] I Jn. 3:6

[4] Or is at least related to right conduct.

[5] I Jn. 3:9.

[6] I Jn. 3:10.

Although scholars have pointed out that a prevalent theme in Johannine literature is the topic of love,[1] here, unblemished ethical behavior comes before love of the brother. In the concluding words of the epilogue of his first epistle the author instructs his audience again:

> Any one born of God does not sin, but He who was born of God keeps him, and the evil one does not touch him.[2]

"He who was born of God" is Christ. Christ, then, keeps his followers from sin and evil. He in turn had claimed of himself that "the ruler of this world. . . has no power over me;"[3] and when he departed he petitioned:

> I do not pray that thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that thou shouldst keep them from the evil one.[4]

Sinless or eternal life was to believe in and to obey the Son.[5]

It is not enough that we merely "sympathise with what may seem to us a narrow attitude"[6] in these writings. It is also unfair to dismiss these passages as a cherished concern of "evangelical piety."[7] Forsyth, in a similar attitude of

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[1] Friedrich Gehninger, Geschichte des Christentums in seinem Gang durch die Jahrhunderte (Konstanz: Carl Hirsch A. G., 1930), pp. 13f.

[2] I Jn. 5:18.

[3] Jn. 14:30; cf. Int. Bible, XII, 500 (exeg.).

[4] Jn. 17:15.

[5] Cf. I Jn. 3:14; Jn. 6:47f., 3:36.

[6] J. B. Phillips, Letters to Young Churches: A Translation of The New Testament Epistles (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1953), p. xiii, (Preface).

[7] Flew, op. cit., pp. 92f.

evasiveness hurries on to show -- beginning even on his first page -- that these Johannine statements are "met with every kind of contradiction;"[1] he, then, concludes in his third chapter that perfection means essentially growth. Such techniques are in danger of overlooking the demand and of oversimplifying the issue; they may only be excused to the extent that they are posed with polemical shrewdness.

Interestingly enough the pressing, imperative command of John is recognized by all these authors as well as others.[2] Phillips, looking back over his translations is impressed by the "surprising vitality" of the letters. He says: "God, by His very Nature, must mean instant destruction to all evil."[3]

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[1]Forsyth, op. cit., p. 1. He proceeds to demonstrate that the Johannine summaries are contradicted by: (1) "John himself," cf. I Jo. 1:8 and 10 (p. 2); (2) "our own experience" (p. 2), unfortunately it is this moral experience which prompts him most to question John (see his opening sentences on p. 1); (3) "the very nature of faith itself" (p. 4); (4) the fact that though God "wills that we be perfect" sinlessness is not his object with men (pp. 11f.); (5) the aspect that sinlessness is "in its nature negative and individual" (p. 16).

[2]Lindstrom, op. cit., pp. 126ff; Perkins, op. cit., p. 80; Gangster, The Pure in Heart, pp. 24 and 27; Path to Perfection . . . pp. 61f. where, evaluating some recent scholars on this subject, he says: "The considered conclusion of these scholars is that the New Testament plainly teaches that the Christian need not sin;" E. H. Johnson, The Highest Life: A Story of Shortcomings and a Goal (New York: A. C. Armstrong and Son, 1901), p. 6; Vincent Taylor, Forgiveness and Reconciliation (London: The Macmillian Company, 1941), pp. 189f., where he summarizes: "Beyond doubt the New Testament teaches the absolute necessity of ethical and spiritual perfection. . . . It would, indeed be difficult to find any important doctrinal theme which is more broadly based or more urgently presented."

[3]Phillips, Ibid., p. xii.

If we recognize this urgency and indispensableness it becomes rather unpardonable that we proceed to assert the sinfulness of man to the exclusion of the demand for Christian perfection. This point needs some clarification.

It is quite evident that there is a Christian tradition -- beginning in the Bible -- which teaches us that man must always remain sinful in the eyes of God. On the other hand it has become forcefully clear by now that there is a tradition which urges perfection.[1] Not only had Paul said: the Christian need not sin; but John insisted: the Christian must live without sins. This contradiction becomes even more puzzling when we realize that both views are presented by the same authors.[2] If, then, they found need to assert both views why should we discard one, and by doing so distort the true picture? The perfection-sinfulness paradox[3] is not the only paradox of faith. To resolve it by making it a harmonious one or the other must always bring loss rather than gain. Since we are defending perfection may it suffice to point out the peril into which we can slip by asserting man's

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[1] In this thesis I have only considered Jesus, Paul, and the Johannine literature; but beyond these we find equally strong expressions in Ezekiel, Hebrews, I Peter, James, and others (Sangster, Path to Perfection . . ., pp. 37-52).

[2] Nothing is more striking than Paul's Corinthian discourse on perfection beside the catalogue of sins which needed to be condemned in the same church. The same holds true for John (cf. I Jn. 3:6-9 with I Jn. 1: 8 & 10; the author speaks of one and the same people), the same for Jesus.

[3] And this is not merely a compromise or the peaceful chosing of the "middle of the road;" it may well be our answer.

sinfulness to the exclusion of his perfection.[1] Sangster says:

> It is in overstressing imputation that the most sad and serious consequences of this unbalance appear . . . by putting the whole stress on the fact that man is not perfect and cannot be, and by calling in the doctrine of imputation to get the sinner past the judgement seat of God, men have at various times in the history of the church lapsed into that horrid creed of antinomianism. Defying the plain warning of the Apostle Paul, they have sinned the more, that "grace may abound." . . . . These "holy" sinners plunged deliberately into the abyss which the apostle marked with solemn care . . . All talk of holiness they abhorred -- except in the sense that it was imputed. They wallowed in filth and quoted scripture as the mire sucked them down.[2]

Of course the same tragedy was enacted by those who claimed sinless perfection but who made clever distinctions between mortal and non-mortal sins[3] or between sins and mistakes. But to conclude from this empirical evidence that there is no victory over sin is to miss the Christian message. Such empiricism will lead us into a dead end street.

Freedom from sin and the continuous battle against sin is like walking -- first one foot, then not the same foot again until the other one has made a stride.[4] Both are necessary, both are equally important, neither one can be spared if the process is to be carried out.

One set of the most antithetical contradictions I have

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[1] We had already hinted at some dangers of undeserved imputed righteousness in a reference to Luther, cf. p. 67.

[2] Sangster, The Pure in Heart, p. 38.

[3] In accordance with I Jn. 5:16-17.

[4] Sangster, Ibid., p. 39.

met in the Old Testament. It may serve to point out the value of our paradox. Hosea delivered a very long and painful message of judgment and doom to Israel; he described in forceful details the invasion and destructions which were about to happen.[1] Then he concluded his message with words that repudiated his former announcements:

> I will not carry out my fierce anger; nor will I again destroy Ephraim . . . I will not destroy . . . How can I give up, O Ephraim! How surrender you, O Israel![2]

Hosea received both messages from Yahweh, both were given to the same people in the same context, and if we but enter into them while we read them we shall find that both are profoundly true. Both are substantial truths, both must be spoken with vigorous authenticity or else they are both lost.

Our paradox is of the same nature.[3] With Paul we

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[1]Hos. 9.

[2]Hos. 11:8 and 9, (An American Translation).

[3]We should here consider the relevant "Oberlin Doctrine." It fell to president Charles G. Finney -- the effective evangelist of educated men -- to accept and promote a new doctrine promoted by William Cochrane, a graduate of the Oberlin College. This student and his brother Thomas presented a paper which attracted the entire faculty. The thesis, "Simplicity of Moral Action," promoted "the impossibility of a divided heart in moral action." It was impossible for a man to decide to do right as well as wrong in one and the same act. At the instant of the willed act man was either perfect saint or decided sinner. He could not be both at the same time. Finney accepted this thesis which lacked nothing as far as logic is concerned. Man remained a Christian only as long as he was free from sin, when he sinned he returned to the way of the flesh and had to be called a sinner. There was a constant oscillating back and forth between the two states. The consequence of this doctrine of perfection are evident: repentance was belittled by being largely the making of man and the strenuous (Continued)

must affirm man's continuous moral inability and sinfulness; but with the Johannine theology we must insist upon the essential sinlessness of the christian.

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frustration brought about by the endless changing of positions became emotionally quite unbearable.

Dr. Johnson concludes that the Oberlin Perfectionism was soon forgotten because it was invalidated in practice. He may add that no religious paradox such as this can be aided greatly by a logical division into a rational system. (cf. Johnson, op. cit., pp. 14-19).

CHAPTER IV

A THEOLOGY OF PERFECTION FOR TODAY

Up to this point we have found the Biblical foundation for the term perfection. We have traced a variety of interpretations of the term through the history of the church and finally, in an attempt to find a relevant contemporary position evaluated some New Testament writers. The later study has convinced us that there is no complete unanimity among the earliest leaders of the church. However the majority employ the term and frequently writers take for granted the teaching of their predecessors.

A modern position has been developed and must always be influenced by two great Protestant theologians -- Schleiermacher and Nygren. We shall next consider their contributions to the question.

Friedrich Schleiermacher

Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher introduced a new period in Christian theology toward the beginning of the nineteenth century. His father, who had been a Reformed army chaplain, and his mother became Moravians. It was in this environment that the young Fritz grew up.[1] He was converted in a Moravian meeting at the age of fourteen and throughout

[1]Jackson, op. cit., X, 240.

his life liked to point back to the exact place and time of this experience. "In the Reden he says that the man who can point to the birthday of his religious life and tell the wondrous story of the working of God upon his soul is an individual, characteristic and special. There are no doublets in the kingdom."[1]

The career of Schleiermacher was strenuous and at periods stormy. In his struggle against the stale enlightenment and his attraction to Romanticism he continuously made enemies and was repeatedly "exiled" from his larger pastoral posts to remote, secluded places. In these intellectual deserts he found stimulation and opportune times to formulate his theological thought.[2] His theology of perfection may be summarized somewhat as follows.

Religion is not a product of external material forces or morality, it is not the result of a system of ethics or doctrine. Religion originates within a vital life-force in human nature. This spark by its very nature seeks the divine. Schleiermacher called it feeling. However, feeling was opposed by sin, an absence of good and a general defect of human nature. It seemed to him as if sin was a necessary step in human development which continuously asked for redemption. To achieve the redemption of man the eternal One had embodied a correlate of human feeling in creation -- i. e., history and the social

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[1] Flew, op. cit., p. 344.

[2] Edward Caldwell Moore, An Outline of the History of Christian Thought since Kant (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925), pp. 75f.

world -- which could produce in man the inward look.[1]

The person who achieved this innermost view was the truly religious man. He was no longer concerned with the thrifty manipulation of powers to gain advantage for himself, but he was the man who had become aware of his absolute dependence upon God.[2]

Christ was the first one to demonstrate this divine indwelling of God in humanity. His person becomes instrumental in the life of men that follow his example. He becomes the redeemer in passing on a two fold consciousness to the saved -- the consciousness of God and the consciousness of the blessing that such knowledge brings. This act of regeneration is sealed by an ineradicable act of sanctification by God.[3]

The supreme blessing of God -- consciousness is the finding of one's true self. Through a conscious relationship with God's Spirit the redeemed is liberated from the concern about external achievements and success. The concern for external virtues is surpassed by the realization of free communion with the creator. This communion can only be maintained by a sustained, introspective, inward look which penetrates the divine consciousness.[4] It results in the ideal Christian experience which bears decided marks of perfection. The state is best described in Schleiermacher's own words:

This thought alone has uplifted me, and set me apart

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[1]Jackson, op. cit., X, 243.
[2]Flew, op. cit., p. 350.
[3]Jackson, Ibid., p. 244.
[4]Flew, op. cit., p. 350.

> from everything common and untransformed in my surroundings; it has made of me an elect creation of the godhead, rejoicing in a unique form and character. The act of freedom which accompanied this inspiration has assembled and integrated the elements of human nature to make a unique existence.[1]

For the first time, perhaps ethics is decidedly irrelevant to Christian perfection. Only incidentally does Schleiermacher develop a system of ethics.[2] It is of interest to consider the function of his ethics.

Ethics is a "speculative science of reason." Its main purpose is to be descriptive rather than imperative. At its best it is a philosophy of civilization[3] describing man's practical activities but also endeavoring to enrich man's experiences by use of reason. The highest good is found in the products of human rationality. But these largely consist of means that control, organize, and govern nature. In short, ethics is the attempt to unify nature and reason.[4]

It is difficult to find why Schleiermacher did not dismiss ethics altogether. Its value seemed to be similar to that of an antique article fit for no practical use. Ethics professors may criticise it for lacking obligatory force while theologians may find it to be a rival of Schleiermacher's own

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[1] Ibid., p. 351.

[2] This consisted primarily of a critical revision of the current teachings of Schlegel, Kant, and Fichte rather than an original contribution (Jackson, op. cit., X, 345).

[3] Kulturethik. J. L. Neve, A History of Christian Thought (Philadelphia: The Muhlenberg Press, 1946), II, 114.

[4] Jackson, Ibid.

idea of redemption.[1]

This observation will emphasize the need of returning to Schleiermacher's real contribution to Christianity. He did not only crucify the rational mind but with it ethics and other rivals of true Christian perfection. He took for granted that God was seeking fellowship and union with man, but he proceeded to look for that element in the creature which made him respond in free choice to the will of the Master.

On his road to discovering man's feeling of absolute dependence Schleiermacher encountered two expressions of Christian attainment which he upheld especially during his later years.

The first of these is his doctrine of the original perfection of man.[2] Interestingly enough man's perfection did not consist in immortality, neither was man's nature impaired or partly destroyed. The prototype of achievement was found in an uninterrupted, continuous communion with God. It is not the sense of dependence but the personal encounter that is brought about by this dependence which leads the Christian to his highest state. The feeling of subordination, he contended, was always present. Even at the moment when the soul bewailed its God-forsakeness and felt its emptiness it actually realized the possibility of meeting God and, therefore, was

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[1] i. e., reason urges man to do that which man's feeling of absolute dependence does, and this to the exclusion of the latter (cf. Jackson, Ibid.).

[2] With this was always associated a belief in an original perfection of the world.

not far from communion with God.[1] Schleiermacher says:

> It is an essential element in the perfection of human nature that those states which condition the appearance of the god-consciousness are able to fill the clear and waking life of man onwards from the time when the spiritual functions are developed.[2]

Flew, comments: "We should be essentially imperfect if the emergence of the feeling of absolute dependence were confined to separate and scattered moments."[3]

Secondly, the Christian gains his highest state by receiving the sinless perfection of Christ. God-consciousness is but feebly present in man. It is strengthened by "the living influence of Christ,"[4] with which experience the Christian enters the invisible, spiritual community and fellowship of faith. Christ is the source of this fellowship. Although this may seem to be a variety of imputed righteousness nothing is farther from the father of contemporary theology.[5] Christ has no surplus or excess perfection before God which he can hand out to those in need. Writing about the nature of the Christian faith he insists repeatedly: "Nur das Vollkommene vor Gott bestehen kann."[6,7]

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[1] Flew, op. cit., p. 360 [2] Ibid., p. 365.

[3] Ibid. [4] Ibid., p. 365.

[5] Moore, op. cit., pp. 81f. [6] Ibid., pp. 342 and 367.

[7] Christ took a unique place before God, and his followers must do likewise. This did not imply freedom from intellectual errors. In fact, Schleiermacher asserted that the Christian understanding of perfection was greatly handicapped by its association with the static. This is not held by the Gospel. Schleiermacher's perfection is foreseen in the dynamic expressions of God and Jesus (Moore, op. cit., p. 85).

> This is perfectionism with a vengeance! And at the centre of the thought of the Father of modern theology! The wonder grows that so little attention has been paid to it by German theologians who have admired their great precursor. The statements. . . do not occur in any appendix to his systematic thoughts. . . but in his exposition of Redemption wrought by Christ, the governing idea of his dogmatic system.[1]

Schleiermacher brought about three new emphases in our doctrine.

First, in spite of his emphasis upon the passivity of religion, he stressed the importance of the community. "Man in his isolation from his fellows is nothing and accomplishes nothing. The interests of the whole humanity are his private interests."[2] Here, mysticism is brought out of its isolation into the human community.

This suggests his second contribution. Although he is frequently criticised for his inadequate doctrine of sin,[3] he needs to be praised for bringing reform to the concept of goodness. Goodness is not only imparted by God in a supernatural way but we can find a liberal distribution of natural goodness in the secular life.[4]

Thirdly, and most important of all he spoke of Christianity as teleological. This is a decided modern characteristic. What the Christian hopes to be he must already exhibit perfectly in an imperfect world. The end must be judged by its present manifestations.[5]

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[1] Flew, op. cit., p. 367.

[2] Moore, op. cit., p. 79

[3] Cf. Flew, op. cit., p. 369.

[4] Jackson, op. cit., X, 343.

[5] Moore, op. cit., p. 80.

Anders Nygren

Anders Nygren and his Agape and Eros belong to the Swedish Lundensian school of theology which in the words of Ferré endeavors to turn from a perplexed, ambiguous relativism to the absolute certainty and assurance of religion. "Religion and theology must be to them both Evangelical in content but strictly scientific as to its method."[1] The religious experience may be compared to the experience of pain. There can be nothing more illogical than pain but if man desires to describe the experience he must use rational categories.[2]

The illogical in Nygren's work is the divine agape. It is that manifestation of God which brings salvation to man. Agape is best expressed in the life of Christ. Although the commandment of love existed as one demand among many in the Old Testament it is in the New Testament that it becomes the "universal and all-embracing" fact.[3] Men are commanded: "Love your enemies . . . that ye may be children of your Father which is in heaven,"[4] because this is the very nature of God who in his infinite love "makes His sun to rise on the evil and the good."[5] Here, the Christian is expected to be an image of God. This is only achieved by a father-child relationship of the highest intimacy.

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[1]Neve, op. cit., I, 184. [2]Ibid., p. 185.

[3]Anders Nygren, trans. Philip S. Watson, Agape and Eros (2 vols.; London: S.P.C.K., 1953), p. 65.

[4]Mt. 5:44f. [5]Mt. 5:45.

Jesus came to show "not a new conception of God, or new ideas about God, but a new fellowship with God."[1] He spoke in terms of the fatherhood of God and his suffering for sin. God was the shepherd who not only mourned about the lostness of his sheep but who went after them to restore them.[2] Jesus, the extension of this divine love, insisted: "I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."[3] This he did because he was commissioned to do so by God. "God seeks the sinner and wills to take him into fellowship with Himself. Fellowship with God is not governed by law but by love . . . not by retributive righteousness, but by freely giving and forgiving love."[4]

Jesus, then came to show that fellowship with God depended "exclusively on God's Agape"[5] not man's qualities of obedience or adherence to law. With Ritschl there arose a trend which favored this latter conception. It is concisely summarized by Harnack as "the infinite value of the human soul."[6] The Gospel does not present such a view of man. Nygren proves by the parable of the prodigal son that

> Agape is creative love. God does not love that which is already in itself worthy of love, but on the contrary, that which in itself has no worth acquires worth just by becoming the object of God's love . . . Agape does not recognize value but creates it.[7]

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[1]Nygren, op. cit., p. 68.

[2]H. A. Williamson, "Jeremiah and Jesus -- In comparison and contrast," in James Hastings, The Expository Times (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1923), XXXV, 40.

[3]Mk. 2:17.

[4]Nygren, op. cit., p. 70.

[5]Nygren, Ibid., p. 75.

[6]Neve, op. cit., p. 186.

[7]Nygren, Ibid., p. 78.

It is quite evident[1] that man's love for God must in turn be as unconditional and spontaneous as God's agape is toward man. It is necessary for it to be "unmotivated," however, man can do nothing without motivation. This paradox can only find its solution in Jesus' explicit example. Man gives himself without reservation or disguise to be absolutely and completely possessed and owned by God. Only in this response can there be found spontaneity. All expectant thoughts to receive something from God are foreign to and absent from this surrender to the creator. "When God gives his love freely and for nothing, there remains nothing for man to gain by loving God."[2]

But the highest purpose of the Christian is not fulfilled until the second part of the commandment is realized. This is the part which leads us to the Christian ethic. Nygren's observations concerning it may be summarized under two points.

First, love toward the neighbor is not an additional ethical requirement appended to the supreme command to love God. Rather it is as intensely religious as the former. If it is taken out of the composition of the fellowship with God it ceases to be a religious ethic and joins the ranks of morality. If the Christian loves his neighbor "for God's sake" or for "hidden values" that may some day develop in him he merely adheres to a cultural morality but not to the Gospel.

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[1]From Mk. 12:30. [2]Nygren, Ibid., pp. 95-97.

Christian love of the neighbor like love of God must be unmotivated and uncalculated. It must love not because there is some value but because God does freely love. Jesus criticised prudential moral love in these words: "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them."[1] He left no uncertainty about what the love of the children of God was like when he declared: "I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."[2] Such love is indeed only an echo of God's love but it is essential that it is an echo. Love for the neighbor "is dependent on fellowship with God and experience of the divine love."[3]

Secondly, it was no accident that Jesus distinguished between the love toward God and love toward the neighbor. Although the entire commandment is considered the greatest of all it consists quite acutely of two commands in one form.[4] To make the two identical is as much a perversion as to judge their importance to be of two different degrees. The former

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[1]Lk. 6:32. [2]Mt. 5:44.

[3]Nygren, Ibid., pp. 96f.

[4]In Luke (10:27f.) the commandment is quoted as one law. In Mark (12:28-31) Jesus is asked by a scribe what the first commandment is. He answers: ". . . you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart . . ." and continues without being asked: "The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" Then he concludes: "There is no other commandment [singular] greater than these [plural]." Matthew (22:36-40) records the same incident with the comment of Jesus that the second commandment is like the first in importance (cf. Gospel Parallels: A Synopsis of the first three Gospels New York: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1949, p. 25).

has been done frequently by those who claim that God is loved when man loves his neighbor because God is present in the neighbor. This overlooks the fact that God and man are never identical even in their closest union.

It is, however, likewise a perversion to add to these two-in-one commandments any other types of love. To "love thy neighbor as thyself" does not mean that self-love is necessary before neighborly love can be exercised. It is quite clear that the New Testament presents at no place a command to self-love. This is always assumed to be a natural element in man. Besides this it is partly responsible for man's lostness and predicament and in the end quite in contradiction to self-giving agape. God's love must overcome completely man's natural self-love in order to be realized.[1]

Lest Nygren be misunderstood at this point and all too easily be set on the side of Barth who sees no value in the world of eros and man, a comment of A. G. Herbert, the translator of his first volume, ought to be considered at this point. He observes that Nygren strives repeatedly not to overlook God as creator. In the end the God of agape is the designer and organizer of the world of nature and humanity. Consequently he cannot only be called the author of eros and natural goodness -- and the ensuing upward move of man -- but the creator who has chosen this temporal realm to declare and show forth His glory. This manifestation of God is not contradictory or antagonistic to his personal revelation through

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[1]Nygren, Ibid., pp. 97-100.

agape in redemption but is augmentary and corollary.[1] Concluding his investigation of the Platonic idea of eros, Nygren observes:

> Never in any circumstances, not even in its highest form as yearning for the divine, does eros shed its egocentric habit of mind. In order to prevent any misunderstanding, however, let it be clearly stated that the world "egocentric" is not used here in any derogatory sense. It expresses neither approval nor disapproval, but is simply descriptive of the type of love to which Eros belongs.[2]

The natural man is God's man but he is not completed until he receives redemption through agape.

The agape motif has never been absent in the history since Christ. As we have observed earlier Johannine theology identified God and his love: God is love. Paul insisted that Jesus, his cross and resurrection, are a direct revelation of this love which is, thus, permanently linked to Christianity. But it has also been lost or mingled with other concepts for long periods of time.

Luther, in a real sense understood the love and grace of God in the primitive apostolic meaning and in shattering a complex legalistic morality returned to the Christian ethic. With him again Christian love is spontaneous and self-giving in contrast to sacramentalism and legalism. Legalism can only instil fear of punishment or concern for reward. Both of these had cast Luther to the bottom of the pit of despair in his personal experience until he found peace for his martyred

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[1] Cf. Neve, op. cit., p. 187. [2] Nygren, op. cit., p. 181.

soul in God's free agape. Now he felt that he could fulfill the commandment of loving the neighbor. This love could well up only out of the new fellowship with God. It is supra-legal and supra-moral.[1]

With this we have come to a strong note of perfection in Luther. This divine love by its very nature has the character of "roundness and wholeness," not judging the value of its object it is directed, he says, to the godly in the same manner as to the ungodly.[2] Christian love is like a fruitful figtree which bears fruits regardless whether it grows among thorns or has been planted in a flowery garden. A "good tree cannot produce bad fruit."[3]

These fruits are meant to be picked by anyone who wills. God's agape in the channel of man is a quellende Liebe, an overflowing love.[4] Its nature is to well up, to issue forth, to spring out, to gush forward; to grow, flow, swell, and arise. It can only be present in its fullness, it can never decrease but increase only.

But agape is not only an overflowing love. Its most basic nature is found in its expression as verlorene Liebe, lost love. With this, Luther decidedly and firmly rejects Augustine's tendency to find a motive for love in the possibilities of further perfection. Love never seeks to be crowned

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[1] Nygren, op. cit., pp. 726-31. [2] Ibid., p. 730.

[3] Ibid., footnote 2. cf. Mt. 7:16.

[4] Ibid.

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by success. It is free from all rational calculation.[1] This means precisely that it never seeks its own good.[2] It seeks to serve, do, and be spent. There is no question if it achieves what it set out to do.[3] Lost love is always acting love; it is timeless because it never asks: when will sin be conquered.

It is rather evident from the Judaic-Christian tradition that love finds oneness through pluralism. We can be quite sure that it is constituted of goodness, justice, judgment, hope. But all rational analysis must fall short to describe it. Only a person can communicate it to a person. Christ was the man to demonstrate that God is love and seeks union with man. To enter into this union must always mean that man has finally found his purpose and destiny, namely to work with God for the realization of His will. As we have seen the idea of achievement and perfection is totally foreign to the concept of agape. Perfection has only meaning in the world of reason and eros, the world in which we live.

It has become increasingly difficult to escape the fact that the concern for perfection (i. e. union with God through

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[1] Ibid., p. 732.

[2] At this point we find the true meaning of forgiveness and forgetfulness.

[3] In this sense it is contradictory to speak of a danger that love can become an absolute in a pluralism. An absolute strives to assert priority over other relative, principles; but this is exactly what agape does not do. The aim of divine love is not to assert itself but to spend itself selflessly. It is irrational and, therefore, reason must call agape a foolish and stupid act of God.

agape) is the concern of man before he has entered this union but ceases when union is achieved.

Now, it remains to be seen if the idea of Christian perfection can still be considered a rational concept. Is it concerned with man's highest possible achievement in this world?

The Doctrine on the Modern Church Scene

After considering these vital contributions of two rather widely esteemed Theologians we must cast a look upon the contemporary, practical field and see in what forms the doctrine of perfection is preached and practiced. Idealism can never be allowed to go its own way but must stand the test of empirical, practical experience.

The picture we find may be considered quite disheartening to some. In modern perfectionism we find much imperfection. But this does not mean that the idea of Christian perfection in this temporal realm has been an ideal that has not stood the pragmatic test. The fact that it lives on in controversies and in great variety, on the contrary, proves its inherent goodness.

The modern Catholic interest is expressed by the recent work of Garrigou-Lagrange -- who seems to recognize somewhat the Protestant teaching of the perfecting of all believers -- when he says:

> Perfection is an end toward which all must tend, each according to his condition, . . . assuredly actual grace [is] progressively offered to us proportionate to the end to be attained, for God does not command the impossible. He loves us more than we think.[1]

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[1]Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, The Three Ages of the (cont.)

The interesting Protestant slant is achieved by the Roman trick word "actual grace." But how did the Wesleyan concept of perfection for all believers fare?

As we had seen in our study of Wesley there were moments during the time of violent controversy when he was at the verge of abandoning his concept.[1] This was especially the case when such fanatic preachers as Thomas Maxwell and George Bell had overbearingly and ecstatically pressed for the immediate experience of sanctification. But in the end he was always convinced by the Scriptural use of the term and current individual experiences to re-enforce his teaching. Nevertheless, the fact remained that he had modified and reformulated his expressions of the doctrine.[2]

These two strands in Wesley himself later aided his church to cast doubt upon the entire doctrine. New England taught anything but perfection. Sparsely settled it was Anglican Virginia which showed strongholds of the teaching. But except for such select areas as this the crude frontier life smothered the doctrine which called for sensitive religious hearts and souls. Primitive wilderness life scorned and finally set aside earlier urges to devotion and sanctification.[3]

Interior Life (vol. I; St. Louis: B. Herder and Company, 1947), pp. 203f.

[1]Cf. pp. 40 and 51.

[2]John Leland Peters, Christian Perfection and American Methodism (New York: Abingdon Press, 1956), p. 182.

[3]Peters, op. cit., pp. 188-89. An excellent study of The History of the Doctrine of Christian Perfection in the Evangelical Association has been made by Ralph Kendall Schwab (Menasha: The Collegiate Press, 1938). It traces the early controversies, the period of quiescence which followed, and the subsequent division at the renewed struggle.

It was not until nearly a century later that perfectionism was revived from Presbyterian-Congregational circles under the protagonists Charles Finney and Asa Mahan. We have already earlier footnoted the Oberlin theology of this period.[1] It is characteristic of the kinds of treatment which Wesleyan views received. However, their main concern -- instantaneous sanctification -- was in agreement with Wesley.[2]

By the beginning of the twentieth century "men of the warm heart" employed the idea of holiness to counteract stern adminstrational polities as well as intruding modernism. But as in Wesley's days there arose the counter party which argued that sanctification was a part of regeneration and not a separate work. Beyond this it was a matter of steady growth and increase. The demand for peace brought about a forced compromise between these two factions of the church in which the instantaneousness of the experience suffered again. The result was a withdrawl of a number of small groups which proceeded to teach the instantaneousness of the experience.[3]

One of the esoteric covenants of this period, we have seen, was the Church of God.[4] Although the controversy did not arise in Methodist circles it somehow slipped into the general concern of other small groups. Now we must recall

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[1] cf. pp. 86f.

[2] Peters, Ibid.

[3] Peters, op. cit., pp. 191f and 194.

[4] cf. pp. 54-59.

how its early emphasis upon the suddenness of sanctification has ebbed off into a general concern about holiness.[1]

It is quite clear what the modern period has taught us. The cycle has been repeated too many times to leave us without insights. The instantaneousness of perfection is not as conclusive as it claims in its extreme forms; but on the other hand the demand for holiness and perfection must be absolutely upheld. The latter is borne out by the variety of small groups within the organized church today which stress the "higher life of the Spirit." Also the request for perfection is still voiced in Methodist ordination services. The question is: "Are you going on to perfection?" "And occasionally a Bishop John Hamilton will ask: 'If not, where are you going?'"[2]

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[1] cf. pp. 57f.

[2] Peters, Ibid., p. 195.

EVALUATIONS

The doctrine of Christian Perfection is too ancient to be dismissed. Its earliest roots and ideas are found in the Old Testament. Almost all writers of the New Testament urge the followers of Christ to be perfect. The teaching can be found during all periods of church history and is not absent in our days.

But the concept is not always presented in the same form. There can be found a variety of emphases and descriptions of it. At times we meet it in ingrown and perverted forms of expression. If we look for certain patterns of development and recurrence or for repeated emphatic concerns we must of course expect to find them in such a momentous conception as this. I shall endeavor to summarize some of these in the following considerations.

The first difficulty seems to arise over terminology. Even after we have carefully defined perfection as "the quality or state of being complete, mature, developed; a high state of excellence; thorough skill or knowledge" the issue is not settled. For even if we were agreed upon this, there would remain disagreement as to what shall be complete and in what way something shall be lead on to maturity. Furthermore, that which is judged to be mature is of necessity only relatively perfect depending on the opinion of various individuals judging. The saints are judged to be saints by

the church and not by a political government. Catholic men who are declared to have attained may not be accepted as such by Protestantism. A man may consider himself holy but his neighbors may doubt his genuineness. We see, therefore, that with all of its absolute characteristics and implications there is some relativity about the term.

Christian perfection conveys a sense of absoluteness; but it must never be identified with an absolute law, requirement, or morality. The apostle Paul denounced the law because it brought knowledge of sin but no salvation and, therefore, caused utter despair. Likewise the conception of perfection cannot be made an absolute necessity in spite of the fact that it bears within it an absolute demand. This explains why so many Christians can continue without a concern for perfection and not be harmed. On the other hand he who does consciously encounter its command comes immediately under its uncompromising requirement. The often quoted passage "you, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt. 5:48) is used in this sense. Here, the term seems to be used in all of its possible vagueness. In spite of this we cannot help but feel the sense of uncompromising requirement which it voices. The Interpreter's Bible points out that the Greek word used in this place is the extraordinary term which is employed to refer to the perfection of the gods. Jesus, then, gives the idea of perfection the most powerful religious basis possible -- God himself. Man must be perfect in the same sense as God is perfect. Of course this could not mean that man must

do what God does. More likely it requires that the man who knows God must do as He does.

But in spite of what has been said the concept of perfection can never be dissociated from moral requirements. Already of Noah we read that he was perfect not only before God but also in his generation. It is doubtful whether a man should be considered perfect by God and not also by men of God on this earth. Should, perchance, a man be called perfect by God, men ought to strive to call him likewise.

In the Old Testament perfection is associated with walking before God or with God. The idea of man's perfection begins, therefore, with God. Since God is the only absolute his demand must be positive; but since man progressively discovers truths about the person and nature of God his understanding of perfection is relative. This accounts for the repeated insistence upon continued growth beyond a definite commitment.

In the Old Testament, perfection was measured by the requirements of the law. Under the New Covenant God reveals himself through Christ as the God of love. Previous truths about his nature still remain valid, but all must be understood in the new light.

The idea of perfection has struggled to be understood in this new light of "God as love" as the conception of love itself has struggled. With Jesus it means continued obedient sonship, a doing of the will of the Father, not his own; with

Paul it means perfect following and imitation of Christ, and thus, all that Christ considered achievement; with John more specifically perfection means oneness with God in such a strong sense that it is not merely a symbol of what will be in the afterlife but that it is indeed its very beginning here and now.

We have seen how fervently John Wesley struggled to keep the concept of Christian perfection. To him it was always a logical attainment. The United Evangelical Church has translated and amended their articles of faith repeatedly. The last edition includes a short summary of the aged Wesley in which his personal agony about the subject comes most clearly. The article reads:

> As to the character of this work of grace, the time attainable, and its effects upon its possessor, that most excellent summary of statement given by John Wesley in the year 1784, fully meets our views. This was after the thought and experience of Mr. Wesley had attained their full ripeness, for he was then within but a few years of the close of his life. He had given much thought to this doctrine, and finally, after a careful review of the whole subject, wrote the sum of what he had observed in a number of brief propositions, to which we as a body of Christians most heartily subscribe. These propositions are as follows:
>
> 1. There is such a thing as perfection; for it is again and again mentioned in the Scriptures.
>
> 2. It is not so early as justification; for justified persons are to go on unto perfection. Heb. 6:1.
>
> 3. It is not so late as death; for Saint Paul speaks of living men that were perfect. Phil. 3:15.
>
> 4. It is not absolute. Absolute perfection belongs not to man, nor to angels, but to God alone.
>
> 5. It does not make a man infallible; no one is infallible while he remains in the body.
>
> 6. Is it sinless? It is not worth while to contend for a term. It is salvation from sin.
>
> 7. It is perfect love. I John 4:18. This is

> the essence of it. Its properties, or inseparable fruits, are, rejoicing evermore, praying without ceasing, and in everything giving thanks. I Thess. 5:16, etc.
>
> 8. It is improvable. It is so far from being incapable of increase, that one perfected in love may grow in grace far swifter than he did before.
>
> 9. It is losable, capable of being lost; of which we have numerous instances.
>
> 10. It is constantly both preceded and followed by a gradual work.
>
> 11. But is it in itself instantaneous or not? In examining this let us go on step by step. An instantaneous change has been wrought in some believers; no one can deny this. Since that change, they enjoy perfect love; they feel this and this alone; they rejoice evermore, pray without ceasing, and in every thing give thanks. But in some this change was not instantaneous. They did not perceive the instant when it was wrought.[1,2]

Schleiermacher has recalled to us two New Testament requirements for perfection. (1) Although perfection is repeatedly associated with moral action and expression[3] its beginnings are found in feelings of absolute dependance and inadequacy. Action without this feeling can only be arrogant affirmation of self-sufficiency but not Christian perfection. (2) Man must strive toward a definite end (*télos*) in this life. This end is union with God. It is the end of man and the beginning of God. It is the realization of God's rule which can only be established to the extent that man's rule ceases. This biblical sense of *telos* can never be separated from the

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[1] Schwab, *op. cit.*, pp. 151-55.

[2] It is the main thesis of Lindstrom to show that two unreconcilable elements are permanent parts of the Wesleyan doctrine of salvation -- it holds to a reformed view of justification and an arminian view of sanctification. This is the problem of modern wesleyan scholarship which is always in danger of leaning to one side and belittling the other. Lindstrom, then, proceeds to show that the idea of sanctification dominates the thought of Wesley. It is the final step in man's salvation and absolutely required of the pilgrim to heaven.

[3] See for instance quite clearly in Inst. cf. pp. 75ff.

conception of Christian perfection. But this is precisely the supreme danger today.

Ever since the industrial age, perfection has come to be associated with such words as value, worth, price, excellency, rareness. In the moral realm, therefore, it always meant virtue, superiority, benevolence, merit, [illegible], quality, efficiency. We see immediately that such terminology denotes a sense of excelling or surpassing. It becomes comparative; it compares itself with an object of its own realm. That which is called perfect is frequently proved to be so by comparison with lower and higher degrees or in relation to the imperfect. The perfect becomes the superlative and usually the absolute. With this, the fate of the perfect is sealed. It has dug its own grave.

Unfortunately unchristian Christian ideals have repeatedly moved in tracks like these. They are the cliffs and crags on which the stately ship has been broken and shattered. Therefore, there is urgent need to return to the safer waters of the New Testament.

Here, however, we have to do with an apparent contradiction, the self-humiliation paradox. Those who defend the first side with Paul and Augustine have pleaded with them that man is more likely to keep humble if he remains a sinner. Perhaps, Sangster has spoken most creditably to this attitude. He says:

> That they should plead for humility is altogether fitting, for it is the fairest of the graces and all our progress can be measured by our growth in it.

> But . . . to make a defence of this deadly leprosy of the soul as a means to humility is surely strange. How much sin keeps us humble? Is it not the nature of sin to make us proud and less likely to repent? Is not the cleansed soul's awareness of utter dependence on grace . . . enough to beget the coveted bloom of humility upon the spirit?[1]

Besides this we have left out of consideration that both Paul and Augustine were strong proponents of perfection in this life.

Another familiar charge is that all perfectionism must hopelessly fall into antinomianism and personal overbearance. But we must again say that nothing can be more false than this. We cannot forget that the same criticism was heaped upon faithful Calvinists who cleverly knew how to insist that they were predestined to certain sins and vices. Shall we rather promote "happy sinnership" or the seeking after holiness? Shall we go on to affirm that all righteousness which man can possess is superimposed righteousness of Christ?[2] Is it sinful to seek after righteousness in a way in which Christ did? If contemporary Christology spurs man to action after the example of Christ, it promotes perfectionism in a significant way. The church has too long strained to <u>copy</u> Christ in all of his insignificant details and has lost sight of the real heart of his Gospel. Shall we continue to live unworthily of Christ? Allegedly the entire church is criticised in that it never lives up to its <u>own</u> message. How shall we explain the

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[1] Sangster, <u>Path to Perfection . . .</u> , p. 189.

[2] Cf. <u>Ibid</u>.

numberless sermons preached every Sunday which are a longing cry for betterment? Can we expect none of this to be fulfilled in this life? Has not many a minister seen an awkward, clumsy parishoner become a graceful image of God's love? Why did the backward and seemingly imperfect rather than the noble become an image of God? If it is the prevenient and abundant grace of God alone which matters why is there such difference? God cannot be perfectly ours until we are perfectly His. And we are repeatedly impelled by the New Testament as well as history to be perfectly His.

This brings up the last question. God's love urges man to give himself fully and unreservedly to his creator. If Christian perfection endeavors to do the same is not this concept unnecessary? Could it perchance be substituted by the concept of agape? Two observations are relevent. If the idea of christian perfection[1] should be dismissed, other Christian doctrines should also be discarded because they are surpassed and overshadowed by the conception of love;but agape is not viewed as an absolute among relative values and, as we have seen, never seeks to be the highest or sole principle. Secondly, however, all Christian doctrines must be in harmony with the greatest commandment; they must be permeated and transcended by it.

More specifically, Christian perfection is concerned

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[1]Now always used in the New Testament sense, not with the connotation of "excellent" and not with every connotation of "achievement" (cf. p. 112).

with the particular, active response of man after he has been inflamed by God's love. Thus, it is a doctrine that builds on grace and works with faith. Furthermore, it recognizes man's freedom before God. In God's act of salvation man must respond willingly. It is necessary that he cooperate (even though it may be as a "slave") to the fullest -- and that, to his fullest. He must give his all as God gives His all.[1] Beyond this, it recognizes that again action is needed in order that the will of God may be realized in this temporal realm. It never argues from outward moral acts if man has achieved complete surrender to God, but urges full surrender by way of agape and then asks for action.

Inasmuch as man never knows God and truth entirely, perfection and growth are not exclusive of but complementary to each other. It is in this sense that the imperfect perfect of this realm will some day be subsumed by the Eternal One. And in this sense we must always pray:

> Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of thy Holy Spirit, that we shall perfectly love thee, and worthily magnify thy holy name.[2]

Until the day of the victory of God and his love come we shall not take the side of sin and evil in the despair of the present battle; but in hope, faith, and love we shall ally ourselves with the Spirit of God and the heritage of goodness the source of which has been just as inexplicable as the problem of evil.

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[1] Agape would translate Mt. 5:48: "Be ye perfectly mine as I am perfectly yours."

[2] Used by Wesley, op. cit., VI, 483.

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